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Weekly Internet Poll # 394

Q. Who still doesn't want elections?

Total votes: 8,264

Weekly Internet Poll # 395. To vote go to: www.nepaltimes.com

Q. What do you expect the elections to be?

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KIRAN PANDAY

Behave yourselves

The ultra left and right are main threats to peaceful polls

KUNDA DIXIT

With only a week to go for elections, those who have the most to lose seem to be getting frantic.

Ultra-royalists have threatened more bombs to provoke communal violence. But whatever they are planning, the nation is committed to elections and it's all systems go for 10 April.

The Maoists are also getting nervous that the defeat of some of its top leaders would be hard to stomach for its hardline cadre. The escalation in attacks by the Maoists against NC and UML candidates in the past month followed failure of talks between

the Big Three to secretly distribute seats among themselves.

The violence continued this week and appears to be part of the Maoist bargaining tactic. They want guarantees that no less than 20 of their top leaders be allowed to win from at least one constituency each. Prime Minister Koirala reportedly has said he can fix that. But the UML's Madhab Kumar Nepal is under pressure from his own party not to give in to the Maoists.

One source told us the Maoists are using their tried and tested method of threatening to resign from the government and boycott elections if they aren't

assured a minimum electoral win by Friday evening. Privately, Maoist chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal has told other leaders it will be difficult to control his cadre if there is a rout. Publicly, however, Maoist leaders deny there is any deal. Baburam Bhattarai reportedly told the UML his party doesn't need "charity" from them.

A deal may not be democratic, but most analysts say the Maoists may need to be accommodated for the sake of their party unity and long-term peace. They are more worried about violence against candidates, and the Maoist strategy of intimidating voters in constituencies where they are weak so there is a low turnout.

Across the country the Maoists have been telling voters they have special gadgets to find out who they vote for, or they have threatened entire VDCs with punishment if they let another party win.

EDITORIAL

What's left of the right p2

STATE OF THE STATE CK Lal
Observer observing observers p2

The challenge for the hundreds of elections observers, including Jimmy Carter who arrives next week, is to focus not just on polling day but the impact of voter intimidation during the campaign. ●

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WHAT'S LEFT OF THE RIGHT

Throughout recent Nepali history, the extreme left and the extreme right have always shared a sense of common purpose.

Ever since king Mahendra coopted communists to counter the Congress in the 1960s, the autocratic monarchy and those with totalitarian ideals have seen democrats as their main enemy. The two have often colluded to squeeze the middle.

The Maoists were talking to the palace during Birendra's reign. And Gyanendra just followed Daddy's footsteps when he negotiated with Pushpa Kamal Dahal in January 2005 to divide up the spoils and sideline the parties. When these negotiations failed, Gyanendra staged his military-backed coup in February 2005. Dahal, who was ready to embrace an absolute monarchy, never forgave Gyanendra for double-crossing him.

But both are still untied by a deep loathing for the political parties and their fecklessness. They reason that Nepal can never be truly independent and would never prosper under a western-style democracy. Up to there, many in Nepal may actually agree with them because they have seen the parties squander hard-won freedoms.

What they forget is that we already tried absolute monarchy for 30 years, and it was worse. And direct royal rule after February 2005 was an unmitigated disaster.

There are two forces that still don't want elections. The radical royal right because the polls will consign Nepal's 240 year-old monarchy to the history books, and the ultra left which foresees defeat in the polls and therefore wants to either scuttle it or usurp votes through threats. The Madhesi militants are also against elections, but don't have the nationwide network to disrupt voting.

There may not be collusion yet between these militancies but there is a convergence of interest. There is evidence the extreme right will stop at nothing to provoke communal violence through terrorist attacks like the one in Biratnagar on Saturday. With nothing left to lose, this lunatic fringe of Nepali politics may want to take the country down with it.

Ultra-radical Maoists, who always felt their leaders snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by engaging in the peace process, also want to sabotage elections. That is certainly the feeling one gets looking at their deliberate use of violence against candidates and threats against voters in the past months.

As argued last week in this space ('Their own worst enemy', #393) this tactic will backfire on the Maoist party and deprive it of a fairly decent showing in the polls. International observers and Nepali civil society should stop sitting in the sidelines and condemn YCL excesses in the strongest terms.

The Maoists are aiding and abetting the absolute monarchists by their actions. It is still not too late for comrades to stop using violent language in their election rallies. If they behave like mature politicians who believe in pluralism and democracy, who knows, they may be the kingmaker party.



SAM KANG LI

Food insecurity

Cost of food increases hunger in Nepal

By now we've all heard about it, and certainly felt it as our rupees buy a whole lot less food at the market these days.

Growing energy expenses, competition between bio-fuel and food demands, increases in the frequency and severity of natural disasters, variations in global weather, and changing



GUEST COLUMN
Richard Ragan

consumption patterns in China and India are some of the reasons for the rising price of food.

Coupled with other political, climatic and geographical complications, this makes Nepal's population particularly vulnerable. Drought and other natural disasters in 2006 resulted in a national 13 percent cereal production deficit.

The following year Nepal was hit again with drought and massive monsoon flooding. Ironically, hidden amidst the devastation was a silver lining: Nepal's summer 2007 paddy harvest bounced back with an estimated 17 percent increase over last year's production.

We collectively all breathed a sigh of relief. The calamitous flooding brought water to the Tarai, resulting in a bumper crop. Some suggested food production

finally might be returning to normal levels.

Unfortunately, that optimism was short lived. Market prices for key commodities have risen sharply over the last few months. WFP estimates that the number of Nepalis struggling with food security has doubled to nearly 8 million people. General instability, civil conflict and the increasing number of bandas are significant obstacles to food access for many families.

Another worrying trend is that households are already adopting severe coping strategies that they would normally undertake only during lean seasons in a low crop production year: migrating earlier, selling assets, cutting the number of meals, using savings or seeking credit to purchase food, selling land and even taking their children out of school.

Over the last few decades, Nepal has become a food deficit country. Yields per hectare have not kept pace with population growth. In fact, Nepal has the lowest yield per hectare for rice and wheat in South Asia. Even during a good or normal harvest year, millions of families struggle to meet basic food needs. Nepal relies on imports from neighboring countries and aid to meet the food gap. Vulnerable, food insecure populations rely upon complex migration patterns to travel to places where economic activities and food are accessible. (see also: 'Not just supply and demand,' p9)

There is now a new complication. Because of increased domestic demands combined with poor harvests, India has temporarily banned the export of non-basmati rice and wheat. Nepal, which depends on India to balance its production deficit, is in a lurch.

According to the latest FAO/WFP food security assessment,

more than 10 million people in Nepal are undernourished. Many of these vulnerable populations can't produce enough food to meet their needs, are too poor to buy additional food and/or do not have access to food because they live in remote communities.

The impact of the lack of food is most obvious in Nepal's children. The latest National Demographic Health Survey finds that 39 percent of children under five are underweight. Stunting rates for children under five in Nepal are 49 percent. Wasting, a measure of acute malnutrition, has increased in the past five years to 13 percent and in some areas in the Tarai, it is as high as 20 percent, which is an emergency situation according to WHO standards.

The Government of Nepal has committed itself to make both agriculture and food security a priority in their new Three Year Interim Plan. Yet, the challenge of achieving food security is great and it doesn't happen overnight. Much of Nepal's crop land remains rain-fed and prone to natural disasters which can severely impact crop production, food availability and access, particularly for the most vulnerable populations.

How will families already living on the edge of poverty cope with the current trend in rising prices and decreasing supplies? The government, WFP and the donors must step-up our efforts to implement quick-impact programs that result in long-term solutions to break the cycle of hunger and poverty in Nepal.

Last year WFP fed nearly two million people in the country. We've been working here for over 41 years, and the happiest day for WFP will be when Nepal doesn't need us anymore. ●

Richard Ragan is the Representative for the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) in Nepal.

An observer observing observers

No election is either completely free or truly fair

The act of observation is inherently intrusive. The observer has a direct effect on the object being observed. As reports of Maoist excesses continue to dominate the media, it's time we took notice of the class, community and caste biases of the observers themselves.

Just as a completely free, fair and credible election is an ideal, the mythical neutral observer is a convenient construct, a model. Nothing like that exists in real life.



STATE OF THE STATE
C K Lal

Contrary to conventional wisdom, election observation isn't limited to pre-poll monitoring of code of conduct for elections or post-poll assessment of government machinery. It also includes the task of understanding social processes at work. The impact of structural inequalities upon the outcome of an election is well-known but so little understood that most observers

choose to ignore it.

Poll observers of the media, civil society and international monitoring missions tend to ignore the most basic element of any election: the voter. It is less of a hassle and much more glamorous to observe those with power: political parties, armed groups, extremists, and election officers.

The poor rarely have representation. Modern elections are elaborate and expensive affairs. Physical resources apart, those who have to work for a living can't devote the time required to be able to be considered as a probable candidate, let alone contest. For the vast majority of the electorate, participation in a poll is thus limited to speaking frankly and voting freely. Unless these two primary conditions are created, an election runs the risk of becoming a farce.

A voter, however, is seldom free to speak and the risk of retaliation from armed groups, including Maoists, is often last on the list of his fears. The most primal fear of the poor is inability to find a

job or the risk of losing it if he happens to have one. The unorganised sector, including households with domestics, is the single largest employer of the poor in Nepal.

People running cycle and tyre repair shops, roadside eateries, back alley boarding schools, impromptu food packagers, family-run NGOs and improvised fabricators of shop-shutters and window grills belong to the UML. Small-time entrepreneurs form the backbone of the UML's financial muscle. Their influence had been somewhat curtailed by the rise of militant Maoist unionism.

Emboldened by the poll prospects of their political front, employers now routinely threaten their flock of dire consequences if election results were to show employee's infidelity. You hear it talked about on every street corner, but it doesn't get reported for reasons not difficult to fathom. Class bias certainly, but UML cadres that dominate the media are trained not to publicise anything that harms the party.

With just a few days to go for long-awaited and twice-postponed elections, a section of the ruling elite hasn't stopped spreading doubts about the impossibility or futility of polls. These are the people who 'man' almost all formal election observation committees.

Nepali observers have political affiliation and most internationals are here on electoral tourism junkets.

Let's face facts: with a war-weary insurgent group fearful of electoral drubbing in the fray, the elections will be far from free. Establishmentarian forces closing ranks imply that the competition will probably be less than fair. Then there are the faux-commies crying wolf.

Nothing new there, no election is either completely free or truly fair. We will have to accept the polls if it meets minimum acceptability criterion set by the Election Commission and endorsed by UNMIN. Meanwhile, let the observers observe. They're at best harmless, at worst, irritants. ●

LETTERS

POLL VIOLENCE

The ongoing violence of the YCL against the cadres, candidates and voters of other parties has convinced me that the Maoists mean to keep moderate voters away from the election so that they can do well in the PR vote, even if they don't in first-past-the-post ('Insecure', 'A swastika on the hammer and sickle', #393). The seven parties can smoke the peace pipe but it is not going to change this basic strategy of the Maoists. They seem to have given up the idea of winning hearts and minds, not to mention playing by the rules of the game.

The Maoists have fielded a strong candidate in my constituency and I was considering voting for them. But now I have given up that idea and made up my mind that I cannot and will never vote for a party which disenfranchises people from exercising their voting rights.

Name withheld, Lalitpur

● Zimbabwe's Mugabe and the Maoists are the same. Robert Mugabe used a YCL-type youth organisation to win the first constitution elections against Nkomo. Since then violence and intimidation have secured him success in every election. It is no surprise that the Maoists are following Mugabe's techniques. They do have a popular base but it is not sufficient to give them a majority of seats. Violence and intimidation have been their tools for many years, why would you think they will relinquish them now?

Kishor Kamal, USA

TIBET

India has always maintained a huge interest in Nepali politics. But China only seems to be interested because of the Tibetans who are living here, and is now twisting the Nepali government's arm to make life difficult for them. Tibetans here are not even allowed to carry out a peaceful show of solidarity. It is unfortunate that the Nepali government has forgotten that it came to power through similar democratic protests. The harshness with which the Tibetan protestors are being treated is a shame for Nepal ('Cold blood', #392).

Yes, we all know that Nepal is a small country and comes under heavy diplomatic pressure but the country should not just kowtow to China on issues of human rights.

Name withheld, email

DREAM ON

Our civil aviation authorities refused to grant permission to engineering students to test fly the ultra-light plane they designed ('Flight cancelled', #388) and Suraj Vaidya's idea of manufacturing three-wheelers in Nepal was rejected ('Making things happen', #393). Both show how narrow-minded our authorities are.

People are creative and inventive when no idea is regarded as being too wild, nothing too crazy. The young dare to dream, we must let them.

The students of the Pulchok engineering campus built the Danfe ultra-light with research and professionalism. And how does our government react? By being petty, throwing the rule books at them, being obstructive.

My son, Kirtan, spent endless nights to design, research, test and forage the metal scrap heaps for the right materials to build a 350cc motorbike called the 'Nepali Chopper'. It was an eight foot monster and despite the grime, grease (and stealth test runs at midnight) was a hunk of a machine.

He wanted to start a workshop to make custom bikes, but met one obstacle after another. Registration was denied. Just like the Danfe is sitting in a hangar in Pokhara, the Nepali Chopper also gathers dust in my shed. The dreamer is now in the United States designing and testing engines for launch in 2010 as part of a research team. Thanks to our bureaucracy and outdated laws, his dreams live on, but not in Nepal where they are needed the most.

Prabhu Ram Bhandary, Kathmandu

CHILDREN FIRST

As Kul Chandra Gautam says in his Guest Column ('Children first', #393) children should be the first priority of the New Nepal that will be constructed after the polls. Fourteen thousand children dying every 14 weeks is dismal. Let's hope all the political parties, which claim to work for their people, will think about this number and try to reduce it. Children deserve to live better in the New Nepal.

Prerana M, India

CLIMACTIC CHANGE

The World Bank has provided Nepal with \$514,286 for clean development mechanism ('Climactic change', #393). But nobody is talking about who will manage the money or how transparently it will be invested. It's a shame that most of this money will probably disappear in various people's pockets in Nepal. Bhutan has a much better track record of transparency and sound utilisation of funds. Maybe we should emulate them.

Asish Dhakal, email



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Powerless even after polls

Delays in export-oriented hydro projects may mean more darkness ahead

NAVIN SINGH KHADKA

Among the three big parties, only the NC has an election manifesto in which hydropower is regarded with pragmatism and not nationalism. This is logical since the NC's Gyanendra Bahadur Karki has been Water Resources Minister since April 2006, and has survived efforts by other parties to seize this lucrative ministry. It is under Karki that two major hydropower projects have been approved, and another is pending—all in the past six months and all to Indian private sector firms.

This has raised eyebrows, and opponents of the projects have taken their case to the Supreme Court arguing they should have been approved by the parliament. Even if the three export projects that cumulatively total 1,500MW go through smoothly, the big question is whether they will solve the country's domestic power shortage. It's not likely.

MoWR officials say it's a win-win for Nepal as projects like Upper Karnali, Arun III, Budi Gandaki and West Seti will be built and operated by foreign companies before they are ultimately handed back to Nepal. Until then Nepal will get free power, royalties and export tax.

"Nepal will earn millions of rupees from these projects, Nepalis will get jobs and we will also end up owning the hydropower plants," Minister Karki told *Nepali Times*. "The



journey to making Nepal prosper from hydropower exports has begun."

But how? The journey is already looking rocky and long. And it looks like Nepal may be earning money exporting power to India, but continues to suffer six hours of daily power cuts at home.

Large projects in Nepal are fraught with delays. Upper Karnali and Arun III will take at least two more years for construction to begin. After that it will be another five years if everything goes according to plan. In that period Nepal will probably

be a federal republic, and the autonomous regions will want their share of revenue from plants built on rivers in their territory.

Even the relatively small 70MW Middle Marsyangdi has been delayed by more than three years because of local disputes and its cost has doubled to Rs 26 billion.

The recently signed MoUs for Upper Karnali and Arun III has a clause that says 'Neither party shall be liable for default if there is war, riots, civil disobedience, terrorism or any other cause beyond the reasonable control of either party.' This is leaving a lot

to chance.

The Australian joint-venture West Seti has been delayed by 12 years as it negotiated with Indian power purchasers, lined up finances and insurance. "This time we have made sure delays like the West Seti will not be repeated," explains Anup Upadhyay, MoWR joint secretary. "Developers will henceforth have to ensure financial closure within two and a half years after they obtain the survey license."

The MoUs with the Indian investors of Arun III and Upper Karnali prohibit upstream and

downstream projects. But the Maoists in their manifesto say high dams will be built on the Kosi, Gandaki and Karnali basins and their water will be taken by tunnels to irrigate the Tarai. Depending on how well the Maoists do in the elections, they could demand a renegotiation of the MoUs with the Indians.

In its manifesto, the NC also plans to produce 5,000MW in the next 10 years from the three river systems, but all its planned projects are export-oriented. So who will be producing for the domestic market?

The MoU between the MoWR and the Indian-Italian-Thai consortium (GMR-ITD) entitles Nepal to 12 percent free power from the 300MW Upper Karnali. From the 402MW Arun III project signed with an Indian company (Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam Limited) almost

22 percent of free power will be plugged into the Nepali grid.

Hydropower experts argue that free electricity will not help Nepal meet its increasing domestic demand. They say projects like Arun and Upper Karnali should have been built for the Nepali market. Nepal's demand of 700MW is increasing at 10 percent a year but supply has remained stagnant at about 600MW.

"The real peak demand is already 1,000MW and that means we need a substantial increase in supply," says energy expert Ratna Sansar Shrestha. "How are we going to meet our own power needs?" ●

"Can't do much more than

Can industrialisation be instrumental in the prosperity of Nepal? Has Nepal been able to benefit from industrialisation? What should be done to make Nepali products competitive in the world market? How can we bring in foreign investors? Himalmedia Roundtable tried to come up with answers last week. Participating were Padam Jyoti of Jyoti Group, Rajendra Khetan of Khetan Group, Pradip Kumar Shrestha of Panchakanya Group, Subhas Kumar Sanghai of Sanghai Group, Joseph L Pulikottil of Asian Paints and Chairman of the Bankers' Association of Nepal and CEO of Bank of Kathmandu, Radhesh Pant. Excerpts:



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

Padma Jyoti

Industries are barely able to survive. Politics is responsible for the deceleration of industries. The problems are created by unions linked to political parties. New parties are encouraging unions so as to bolster their vote banks, and the Maoists are taking the lead.

Radhesh Pant

In 1996-97, industrial growth was 14.7 percent, but today it is just 2.2 percent. GDP growth has come down from 5 percent to 2 percent. Recently, when a businessman was beaten up, all the industrialists came together. There should be such unity because there are many

groups with ulterior motives. Competition in business is one thing but if there is no unity the private sector can't move forward.

Pradip Kumar Shrestha

If the industrialists say the country is doomed, it will be doomed. We need to

BoK in Dang

Bank of Kathmandu's 19th branch opened in Ghorahi, Dang. The new branch will serve customers from Salyan, Pyuthan, Rolpa, and Rukum with deposits, loans and advances, remittance and ATM service. BoK has been providing banking services through 19 branches and six service counters.



New chairman

Neeraj Swaroop was appointed chairman of the Standard Chartered Bank at the bank's 235th board meeting. Swaroop is the regional chief executive of Standard Chartered Bank, India and South Asia and succeeds Jaspal Singh Bindra, who now assumes the role of CEO Asia.

Loan scheme

United Finance Limited has launched a 100 percent valuation loan scheme, under which, customers can obtain a loan equal to the total valuation of the collateral. Customers can apply for home construction, land and building, business, education and personal loans. Interest for this type of loan starts from 10.5 percent.

To Euro 2008

Carlsberg is launching a new promotion where on every purchase of two bottles of Carlsberg beer, the customer gets a coupon. This coupon can win the customer a chance to go to Switzerland to watch the Euro 2008 quarterfinal match on 21 June and also present the Man of the Match award.



Flying yeti

flyyeti.com has launched a full scale promotional and awareness campaign to promote Nepal's first low cost carrier airplane. In addition to the free merchandise, flyyeti.com is also promoting their call centre number where every 100th caller receives free tickets. Arun Kumar and BK Shrestha have already won the first two free tickets.



100 years of Daihatsu

Hansraj Hulaschand, on the completion of 100 years of Daihatsu, has launched a new offer where customers can now purchase the Sirion at factory price with extra transportation and taxes/custom charges. Hansraj Hulashchand is the authorized distributor of Daihatsu Motors in Nepal.



Another Dasain

Avoiding work is Nepal's national hallmark

The answers at government offices are similar to the 'try again later' message you get on cell phones. From now on, no requests will be processed or work done until after elections. It's as if Dasain came in Chait this year. Seeing as anthropologists love multi-ethnic and exotic Nepal so much, maybe they could do us a favour and have some studies into this facet of the Nepali character.



ECONOMIC SENSE
Artha Beed

We need to understand why we love to 'dodge' work. Even at the highest levels of government, discussions are not focussed on making the constituent assembly functional after elections, but on how to add more holidays to our already holiday-laden national calendar. Demanding a holiday at any time will be our first constitutional right. While the world is moving towards 24-hour, 365-day operations, we still prefer to work upto 4PM for half the year, and preferably not at all, given the opportunity.

Our love for festivals and breaks from doing nothing has held Nepal back severely, and I believe that if we really want to see Nepal change for the better, we need to mend our ways. Although our incorporation of other religions' festivals apart from Hindu ones to the national calendar scores top marks on inclusivity, it also means that our calendars now have more red days



SAM KANG LI

than black ones.

The elect of the constituent assembly must actually attend it and legislate, not just bask in the sun on their verandahs. Perhaps their salaries should be dependent on how many sessions they attend rather than a fixed sum. Then we might be able to coax them to come and do what they're paid Rs 70,000 a month for.

The onus of pushing efficiency and productivity lies with the private sector, which is considered more efficient and productive than other sectors. But this sector has its own Dashains, tea breaks and pointless interminable karyakrams. It needs to move beyond self-congratulatory expressions of mutual admiration in the newspapers to something concrete that will bring about real improvements in professionalism, governance and competence-building.

It is a sobering thought that more column inches are devoted to the announcement of candidates and candidate offices for the Association of Foreign Employment Agencies than to

reporting on their work and ensuring better regulation of this business so that fewer people are cheated, and normal Nepalis get the best services at the best prices.

The business community missed the opportunity to set the economic agenda for the parties as they were busy setting their own election agenda. When the CA is actually constituted, rather than just putting Best Wishes messages in the papers as usual, the business people of Nepal need to work together with the assembly to bring about a constitution which guarantees private property rights, rights to do proper business and crucially more rights for the consumer.

Perhaps the first issue to tackle could be getting a labour law framework which would allow enterprises to link pay with productivity. This may ruffle feathers in many places, but in Naya Nepal it is time for a real change.

But for now anyway, Holiday Greetings on the occasion of another long break. ●

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hope for the best"

encourage people. If we work together, there is a lot we can benefit from.

Rajendra Khetan
We have never faced the kind of problems that we are facing now. The government, political parties and the administrative sector are responsible for the degradation of the business environment. If the political parties want to politicise the industries, we need to have the right to bail out our investments. We can take our money and invest it in Bhutan or Mumbai but that would destroy this country's industries.

Joseph L Pulikottil
Workers' unions, unskilled manpower, lack of transparency and outreach to markets are some of the problems we are facing today. But the main problem is policy. Is industrialisation a priority for the nation? If so, it should be reflected in the policies and actions of the government and political parties.

Subhas Sanghai
If the problems continue for a couple of years, we will lose everything. The politics of parties, the electricity and fuel shortages will bring industries to a standstill. Our competitiveness in the

international market has taken a knock. Although we are a small country, we can also bounce back quickly once we have stability. The private sector needs to be positive.

Pradip Kumar Shrestha
We aren't money poor, but idea poor. We have all the resources but we haven't utilised them. A national agreement can easily solve this problem but unfortunately, we don't even have an agreement among the private sector.

Rajendra Khetan
Nepal took a great leap forward between 1980 and 1996. A dramatic increase in agriculture or the discovery of mineral deposits may change things, but even if we do the maximum to encourage manufacturing it won't give us more than 10-15 percent growth in GDP. Ram Sharan Mahat, Bharat Mohan Adhikari, Prakash Chandra Lohani and a few others might have understood this but the rest haven't.

Radhesh Pant
Manufacturing has its limitations in Nepal. Farming and herbs may have some possibilities, but we must be prepared for 2010 when Nepal has to open up domestic industries for international players under WTO rules. Amongst the industries we have today, cement industry is the only one that

may still do well because of export potential to India. But for that we need to plan at least 5-10 years in advance.

Padma Jyoti
We need to decide which sectors have manufacturing and industrial potential in Nepal. We cannot forget that small and medium scale industries can still be beneficial for us.

Joseph L Pulikottil
Nepal does not produce any raw materials. We cannot compete in the international market by processing imported materials. Such products can only be used in the internal market. The industries we have do not provide huge employment opportunities. We need means to respond to unemployment. Nepal needs to think about bringing in multinational companies.

Pradip Kumar Shrestha
Our government lacks good policies, implementation and a decision making ability. The hydropower sector needs a new policy but the government isn't moving.

Joseph L Pulikottil
We haven't been able to utilise the educated manpower in our country. Banks and cooperatives are the first priority whereas

international and national organisations come second. The industrial sector comes third. As long as industrial sector is not a priority, there is little chance of international competition.

Radhesh Pant
The country will move to a positive direction after the polls. A lot of things have come to surface in the past two years. We cannot move on without responding to these issues.

Padma Jyoti
This election is to build a new constitution. We cannot hope for a drastic change in our financial policy. Since the political parties differ so much, a new economic policy looks iffy.

Joseph L Pulikottil
There is talk about federalism and inclusion in the nation. We need to analyse the possible effects of federalism on the economy. Is it also going to be inclusive?

Rajendra Khetan
We cannot expect the elections to change everything. There might be some changes in administration, but we can't do much more now than hope for the best.



PARSURAM KAFLE



BIKASH KARKI

HIGH HORSES: Prachanda (CPN-M) and Sher Bahadur Deuba (NC) take to horseback for the long campaign trail in their constituencies in Rolpa and Dadeldhura.

Mindless

Editorial in Gorkhapatra, 31 March

गोर्खापत्र

As the election nears, anti-democratic elements are doing their best to scupper it. A case in point is the explosion in a mosque in Biratnagar, which killed two people. It was a carefully orchestrated act of violence aimed at instilling

hatred and anger into the Muslim community. Although the majority of Nepalis are Hindu, there is equal respect for other religions. But some extremists, taking advantage of Nepal's transitional period, are attempting to jeopardise the good relations between different communities. This bomb attack was such an attempt. The government should strengthen overall security along

with that of religious places. The perpetrators should be brought to justice. This is not just a question of the security of devotees at holy places, it is an attack on the beliefs of normal people. The time has come for the government to prove that Nepal as a secular country has equal respect for all religions and those who target others' beliefs will not be let off. If the criminals are swiftly brought to justice, it will send

out a strong message to the people of Nepal and the international community that the government is committed to promoting and protecting all religions and ethnic communities. The Muslim community, in this hour of grief, must be patient. We know they are feeling humiliated and outraged at the moment but they should know that all Nepalis are with them. Nepal believes in humanity, good will and fraternity of people. We must not let these criminals damage this, and should unite against anyone who tries to do so.

Complaint

Budhabar, 2 April

बुधवार

A complaint has been filed against Minister of Physical Planning and Works Hisila Yami (CPN-Maoist candidate for Kathmandu-7), and Maoist chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal (CPN-Maoist candidate for Kathmandu-10) at the Election Commission by the Kathmandu Valley Mobilisation Committee. The complaint was filed against them for not adhering to the EC code of conduct during campaigning and for not removing election graffiti as directed. A complaint has also been filed against the Maoists for using government funds to campaign in Lalitpur-1. Hisila Yami has included statistics of funds allocated by the ministry for development works in her

campaign pamphlet. The complaint lambasts Yami for making public government expenditure in her election campaign to get votes. It is understood that the Mobilisation Committee will sit with the organisations monitoring the election to discuss the issues raised.

Electoral barbs

Kantipur, 2 April

कान्तिपुर

UML general secretary Madhab Kumar Nepal wants to be the executive head of the country. In response to a question asking whether he would prefer to be president or prime minister on the Kantipur television show Sarokar, Nepal replied, "I am just 53. I am not old or disabled. I am energetic and dynamic, which is why I wish to be executive head." Even if the UML win a majority in the CA elections, Nepal said that a joint central government will be formed and that political alliances will be held until the constitution is written. He said the three main challenges for the country are the remnants of monarchism, the status quo and the far left. An audience member said that the UML is not a real communist party and that the constituent assembly and republic were not on their agenda. Nepal responded: "Those who are pushing for a republic

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DRISTI

now weren't even born when the Nepal Communist Party first put forward the republican agenda in 1949."

Nepal also came under fire for not performing the last rites for his mother but yet paying respect to king Gyanendra. Nepal had a ready answer: "As long as he was head of the country, everyone respected him. When Baburam was being arrested in Rolpa, at the same time Prachanda was negotiating with king Gyanendra to become the next president."

He also warned the Maoists against threatening his candidates like KP Sharma Oli and Rajendra Pandey. "If anything happens to them, Prachanda will be held responsible." He warned: "As with king Gyanendra, we won't let the Maoists go."

Women workers

Sushil Aryal in *Himal Khabarpatrika*, 29 March- 12 April

हिमाल

Lebanon—Six of the seven thousand Nepali workers in Lebanon are women. The contracts under which they are employed mean that they are unable to change employers. According to sources in Lebanon, many Nepali women live effectively as prisoners of their employers, and some are also victims of physical and sexual abuse.

Sarada Phuyal who worked as domestic help in Beirut died on 17 March this year. Police reports say it was suicide but the Nepali

community here is suspicious. On 21 March, Dilli Poudel, chairman of the Non-Resident Nepalis Association in Lebanon



issued a press release saying that 12 hours before her death, Sarada had contacted a certain Mohan Prasai and told him that her mistress had checked her passport and she would be able to change her place of work.

A day before the death of Sarada, 32 year-old Kamala Nigari jumped from the fifth storey of a building. Although she survived, she broke both her legs. A few months ago, the dead body of Ganga Rana, who also committed suicide to escape abuse, was brought back to Nepal. Manamaya Giri has been reported missing since she asked for her wages. The list goes on.

These incidents provide only a glimpse of what Nepali workers in Lebanon are facing. "No one is addressing our problems. The consulate should try harder to understand our situation or he should be replaced," says Dilli Poudel.

Most Nepali workers in Lebanon are simple labourers. Women working as domestic helps earn between \$125-250 per month. However, they are often kept waiting for years before being paid.



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संविधान सभा सदस्य निर्वाचन २०६४



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PICS: SHEERE NG



MALLMANDU

SHEERE NG

On the 600 metre stretch of road between Pulchok and Jawalakhel there are three big supermarkets. At Kamal Pokhari, the fancy new City Centre Mall is coming up. Just in the past two years, we have seen the opening of the United World Trade Centre and the Kathmandu Mall.

Despite a burgeoning mall culture, Kathmandu's citizens haven't given up on their neighbourhood kirana pasal. In fact, these mom and pop stores are doing quite well despite the competition from the megastores.

Why mom and pop shops still do well despite Kathmandu's mall culture

Economic liberalisation in the 1990s brought a flux of imported foreign goods, and middle-class incomes rose because of remittances from abroad. The economy went into freefall during the conflict years, and is only now picking up.

But despite growth since Bluebird became the first supermarket in Kathmandu 22 years ago, there are still only eight supermarkets and malls for the Valley's population of 2 million. So, for most of the population the neighbourhood shop is still where they buy most of their basic needs.

Kathmandu's family grocery

shops have been slightly affected by supermarkets, but only if they used to be located near a big mall. "Kirana pasals are still a trusted part of the local community," says business analyst Ashutosh Tiwari, "many allow regulars credit and they serve as social centres for their neighbourhood."

Ram Shrestha in Sanepa has been patronising the same grocer for more than 20 years, eschewing the range of goods available in the supermarket just a stone's throw away. "The owner provides a good service and makes me feel important," he says.

Most Kathmanduites believe kirana pasals are cheaper than supermarkets, although this is not always the case. For instance, Druk canned pineapple slices cost Rs 100 at Bhatbhateni but Rs 106 at a neighbourhood store in Patan; Rara instant noodles cost Rs 10 at Saleways but Rs 11 at a family grocer.

Some Kathmandu supermarkets wonder if their failure to capture a larger share of the market is because of lack of marketing. But they say instability in the country makes investing in a long-term advertising campaign too risky. Apart from that, Arpana Mohpal, managing director of Trends Advertising and Marketing Consultants, explains: "Brand loyalty is non-existent in Nepal."

At the end of the day Nepal is still a low-income country, with a small middle class and low purchasing power. "Comparing us to America or even India is like comparing an apple to an orange" says Binod Tuladhar, executive director of Bluebird Mall.

Tuladhar says big retail business is constricted by employment laws and powerful unions, and complains that he

loses a lot of money from inefficiency among staff. The overheads for small shops are much less and in many cases staff are unpaid family members who help out when they are free.

Kirana pasals are now getting in on the act with imported foodstuffs. Uttam provision shop at Pulchok, for example, has brought in fancy foreign imports to meet the demand of expats staying in the area.

Entertainment may be the way for big players to expand their market. In July a new mall, City Centre, will open at Kamal Pokhari. It will stand five storeys high, will be fully air-conditioned, and will have a multiplex cinema, supermarket and a wide range of international brands.

This may be the first of many. In 10 or 15 years' time, the retail landscape of Kathmandu may be very different. But malls will have a long hard battle to capture the hearts and minds of Kathmanduites. ●

LIST OF SUPERMARKETS:

Bhat-Bhateni Supermarket & Departmental Store
Bhatbhateni

Gemini Supermarket
-Jawalakhel
-Boudha Main Street

Saleways Department Store
-Jawalakhel

Namaste Supermarket
-Pulchok
-Maharajganj,

Bluebird Department Store
-Tripureswor
-Lazimpat

Not just supply and demand

DEWAN RAI

India has banned all rice exports except Basmati. Pakistan has reintroduced rationing. Food riots have broken out in some African countries. The world is facing an unprecedented food shortage, and it is the poorest who are hit hardest by rising prices.

In Nepal the price of many food items have doubled in the past year (*See box*). Preoccupied with elections, the government

shortage (See also: 'Food insecurity', p 2)

But this is not the only reason for the price hike. The dramatic rise in oil prices, and the trend towards bio-fuels, increased demand for food and meat and growing affluence in India and China are the other reasons for worldwide shortages.

In Nepal, traders have another reason to raise prices of commodities: to recoup money they have 'donated' to various

wholesalers are selling foodstuffs at a price higher than production cost, and the current price hikes are arbitrary and unnecessary. The fact that wholesalers are not issuing retailers with receipts is a tacit admittance of this fact.

"If we ask for a bill they refuse to sell us the goods at all. We have complained to the Department of Commerce, but no action has been taken," Bajracharya says.

Food economist Jagannath Adhikari says Nepal is feeling the spillover effect of the food shortage in India, but adds that traders are also creating an artificial shortage to gouge customers. Adhikari told *Nepali Times*: "Changing food habits are having an effect on prices, but the growing corporate control of food is starting to pose a serious threat to food security."

The WFP reports say that summer rice production in the Mid and Far Western Regions increased by 17 percent last year, but despite these good crop yields, food prices have increased significantly leaving an estimated 3.8 million extremely vulnerable.



SAM KANG LI

The real reason food prices are rocketing in Nepal and worldwide

seems unconcerned about the hardships suffered by millions of Nepalis.

The price of cooking oil has gone up by more than half in just three months. The prices of rice, pulses and meat have also increased significantly. India's export ban on non-Basmati rice and wheat has worsened Nepal's

political parties for the elections. "Many traders have been compelled to increase the prices in order to make up for donations," said Jyoti Baniya, general secretary of the Consumers' Protection Forum.

Pabitra Bajracharya, president of Retailers' Association said that

Dear food

	Dec 2007	March 2008
Rice (kg)	Retail price	Retail price
Short grain	Rs 24	Rs 30
Mansuli	Rs 32	Rs 40
Fine grain	Rs 41	Rs 48
Cooking oil (litre)		
Mustard oil	Rs 102	Rs 150
Soybean oil	Rs 95	Rs 150
Sunflower oil	Rs 90	Rs 160
Meat (kg)		
Mutton	Rs 335	Rs 350
Chicken	Rs 130	Rs 165

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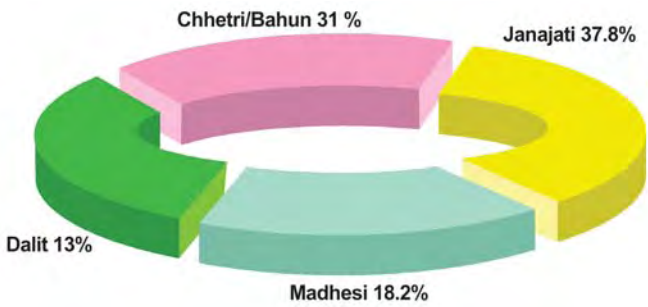


Even after elections, Janajatis and Dalits will not be fairly represented

DEWAN RAI

The constituent assembly election is supposed to right historic wrongs. It is supposed to bring those left out of the political mainstream into decision-making. But looking at the line-up of candidates for the first-past-the-post ballot and the proportional representation vote, Janajatis and Dalits may still not be represented in the constituent assembly in numbers proportionate to their population.

“The constituent assembly is going to be more inclusive this time but it will not be as proportional as it should be,” UML MP Phatik Thapa told *Nepali Times*. Although party candidate lists for this election feature more women, Madhesis, Janajatis and Dalits than in



Janjati population breakdown %	
Magar	7.14
Tharu	6.75
Tamang	5.64
Newar	5.48
Rai	2.79
Gurung	2.34
Limbu	1.58
Other	6.08
Total	37.8

Janjati candidate breakdown %	
Magar	4.75
Tharu	1.44
Tamang	1.27
Newar	6.34
Rai	2.72
Gurung	3.13
Limbu	2.31
Other	7.13
Total	29.2

And what about youth?

With the election only a week away, large numbers of youth are leaving the Valley for their homes. The long lines at ticket counters and crowds waiting for village-bound buses suggest young Nepalis are excited about this election.

Nepal has not had an election for nine years, and more than 22 percent of the listed voters will be voting for the first time. The direction of the country will be decided by those younger than 35, who form 51 percent of the total electorate.

Although more than 50 percent of the voters are ‘young’, youth representation amongst election candidates is dismal. In the FPTP ballot, the UML, NC and Maoists have nine, four and 96 candidates below the age of 36 respectively. Can we trust the same old faces to forge a new road for young Nepal?

Raju Thapa, an undergraduate student says, “the older politicians might have more seats because they are more experienced. If they have understood the people’s desires and adopted modern ideology, we can still expect change.”

Talking to *Nepali Times*, Pradip Poudel, chairman of the NC-affiliated Nepal Students Union said: “we are not satisfied with the way our party has selected its candidates but we do still support the party since it has included our agenda for republicanism and federalism in its election manifesto. Right now we are 100 percent

behind our leadership but if they shy away from fulfilling the people’s mandate, we won’t be silent spectators.”

In a recent press briefing, the election commission stated that 22 candidates under PR were below the required age of 25. Youth leader Amrita Thapa of the CPN-Maoist said: “We had to reject a lot of qualified candidates who applied for



the PR list because of their age. The youth are dynamic and have an important role in bringing about change. Age should not be a barrier for candidates who are qualified otherwise.”

Although there is no strict provision for the inclusion of the youth in the CA polls, there are at least some candidates who can be considered young. While they are not proportional to their contingent of the population, it is a start. ● *Srishti Adhikari*

Same old

MALLIKA ARYAL

Laxmi Bista was preparing breakfast in Sitapila when the election campaigners arrived at her doorstep. She has met several candidates who have come house to house here on Kathmandu’s outskirts to ask for votes, and she has now made up her mind.

“I will vote for a woman candidate,” she says resolutely, and looks on as UML candidate

women will win in the FPTP ballot, and this will mean the proposed 33 percent ratio for women in the assembly is unlikely to be reached.

Hisila Yami, Maoist candidate for Kathmandu-7, is confident that more women MPs will make a difference. “We have never been this inclusive in terms of ethnicity or gender,” she told *Nepali Times*.

But politicians from other parties are not convinced. “It is a

Despite promises of inclusion, women are sidelined again

Astha Laxmi Shakya’s entourage passes by. Laxmi is encouraged by the number of women contesting in this election, and believes more women in the parliament means a pro-women constitution.

Still, out of 3,947 candidates in this election, only 367 are women. When the constituent assembly sits 200 (33 percent) of the 601 MPs will have to be women. The proportional representation ballot (PR) guarantees 168 seats for women. In the first-past-the-post ballot (FPTP), the parties have selected 10 percent women candidates for 240 seats.

But it is clear that only a few

ploy to deprive women of our rights,” says Uma Adhikari of Inter-Party Women’s Alliance, who is concerned women have not been given the recommended number of tickets. “It is not that the parties don’t have capable women, but deep-rooted patriarchy screens out women who are proactive, capable, and smart,” she says.

The PR vote may also not be as democratic as it should. Party leaders will choose their representatives according to the proportion of their overall vote. So voters have no way of knowing which of the up to 335 candidates on the PR lists will be selected.

than others

previous polls, they are still below their population ratios.

Janajatis, for instance, comprise 37.8 percent of the population and the electoral commission has recommended that an equivalent number of candidates in the various parties should be drawn from their ranks.

But not all Janajati communities are included because some have very small populations. Of 59 registered Janajati groups, only 31 have any candidates at all in the CA polls. Sociologist and Janajati activist Krishna Bhattachan explains: "It is practicably impossible to include all Janajati groups under a mixed electoral system. It would only be possible if the system was completely proportional."

The Maoists seem to be the most inclusive party in ethnic and caste terms. Some 194 (33 percent) of their candidates are from Janajati communities, and 47 (8 percent) are Dalits. The NC has 162 (28 percent) Janajati and 30 (5 percent) Dalit candidates, and the UML has 148 (25 percent) and 30 (5 percent) respectively. Each of these parties is fielding a total of 575 candidates.

Whereas the Maoists come fairly close to meeting the recommended quota for Janajatis, both the other main

parties are far behind, and none of the three parties is close to meeting the 13 percent quota recommended for Dalits.

Even among Janajatis, some groups dominate others. Taking the three main parties together, there are a total of 111 Newar candidates, 82 Magars, 25 Tharus and 22 Tamangs. This is in spite of the fact that Magars, Tharus and Tamangs have larger populations than Newars.

Apart from sheer numbers, list which they are on is also important. There are two electoral systems that voters have to choose from: first-past-the-post (FPTP) and proportional representation (PR). Candidates in the FPTP system are able to campaign for themselves, and if they are elected in their constituency, are guaranteed a seat. However candidates on the PR lists can only campaign on behalf of their party. They form a pool from which their parties will nominate representatives according to their overall national share of the votes. For candidates on the PR list getting a seat is far from guaranteed.

Of all the Janajati candidates in the three main parties, only about 40 percent are on the FPTP list, meaning 60 percent will still have to be nominated to the assembly again by their leadership after the election.

UML leader Shankar Pokharel sees nothing wrong with the selection process. "What's important is that candidates have devoted time to the party, remain loyal to the party and help the party in campaigning," he said. "Why should we select someone who criticises the party?"

The parties are under no compulsion to select proportional numbers of Janajatis and Dalits to represent them in the assembly. There are worries that central selection procedures will favour those groups close to the leadership, which, in all parties, are Bahun and Chhetri.

"The selection process has already made certain segments of the population feel excluded in the attempt to draft the first supposedly inclusive constitution," Bhattachan says.

It's likely that many Bahuns and Chhetris also feel excluded by the some of the Janajati groups' demands (now adopted by the Maoists) for ethnically-based federal states. Most areas of Nepal are too ethnically heterogeneous for this scheme to work (See: 'Mapping a mosaic', #392).

However, as long as all regions, castes and ethnic groups are not equally represented in an elected assembly, analysts say, simmering resentment amongst the excluded is likely to remain. ●



WONG SHU YUN

Sticking it out

Bhairawa's businessmen pay a high price for elections

WONG SHU YUN in BHAIRAWA

In this bustling border town where grain traders, cement industrialists and gravel exporters dominate, the people can't wait to get the elections over with. Not so much because Nepal will have a new constitution, but because they hope it will end extortion.

Last month, Maoists torched industrialist Rajeev Kumar Beriwal's Rs 40 million plywood factory. The 33-year-old had received a call on his cellphone demanding Rs 1 million in campaign funding.

"When I said I couldn't pay, by 7.30 PM they had burnt down my factory," says Beriwal (*pictured, above*) who doesn't pick up his cellphone anymore.

Other Bhairawa businessmen keep private cellphone numbers just for family members and close friends. "I don't disclose the number to anyone else," says industrialist Rajesh Kumar Agrawal whose factory was also bombed by Maoists six years ago.

Agarwal says the extortion hasn't stopped, and he admits he's still paying up just so they'll leave him alone. "I pay to avoid trouble, that's life," he told *Nepali Times* with a shrug.

Agarwal and others are all excited about the elections because they hope it will close this chapter of Nepal's unstable transition and allow economic growth. "India is seeing 10 percent growth and we could benefit. For us the next two years will be a test," Agarwal says hopefully.

The conflict destroyed Rajendra Prasad Baniya's ambitious business plans. "Now I want the elections because that is the last chance for my business to expand," he says. The 47-year-old distributes Nestle products and says he will support the NC because it believes in economic liberalisation.

Because their economic policies are so similar, Bhairawa will see a keen race between the NC and UML. But not everyone is hopeful that the elections will improve the business climate. "All the parties have approached me for donations for their campaigns, but they rarely explain what they will do if they win," says Krishna Prasad Sharma, 42. "It shows that they are not sincere about developing the country economically."

Sharma is into export of Nepal's boulders and gravel to India where growth has spurred demand for construction material. There are now 35 stone and gravel exporters in the Lumbini area alone and they can't keep up with demand from India. Sharma's biggest gripe is that while he pays the government Rs 60 million a year in taxes, he also has to pay a parallel Maoist tax.

Then, there are others like Rishikesh Agrawal, 41, who has given up on elections and on Nepal. Agarwal moved himself and his family to India for good after the JTMM demanded money. When he refused to pay up, they bombed his home and factories. ●

'menstream' politics



DOING THE ROUNDS: UML candidate for Kathmandu-8 Astha Laxmi Shakya goes door-to-door in Sitapaila last week.

KIRAN PANDAY

Central selection procedures are likely to favour men.

Sujita Shakya of the All Nepal Women's Association says that the parties have deliberately put prominent women in seats where they are bound to lose. "Women who were sure to win from their area have not been allowed to contest in FPTP, and those women who were selected are either contesting in places where they have no influence, or in strongholds of other political

parties," Shakya says.

Kopila Adhikari of the Advocacy Forum wonders how many capable women will actually end up as MPs. "We need qualified women in parliament who can speak up for the rest of us, but the parties have basically selected token yes-women."

Sociologist Krishna Bhattachan advises women to take steps right after the elections to ensure that they are

not sidelined in the constituent assembly.

He suggests pressuring the political parties to recommend names of women for top positions, organising an inclusive national women's conference to work on a separate draft of the constitution, and advocating their cause in the streets.

Says Bhattachan: "The stronger the pressure from the outside, the more effective decisions are going to be inside the parliament." ●

After 4/10

Give the Madhes a stake in the constituent assembly process and government

Returning to Kathmandu after travelling for three weeks through the Tarai and Bihar, the pessimism and impending sense of doom in the capital is striking.

Will elections take place? What happens after 10 April? How is a bad election better than no election? Will it be violent? What will the Maoists do if they lose? Are the royalists allying with Madhesis?

Valid questions. But let's begin with what seems to be going relatively right. The electoral violence in the Madhes could have been a lot worse. Violations of the code of conduct are within South Asian norms. The

attempt to provoke a religious backlash by bombing mosques has not worked. The security forces have tightened their grip on the Tarai without gross human rights violations yet. Armed groups are reconciled to polls.

This is not to discount the potential for violence with royalists and militants keen to discredit the process.

The elected assembly will be the most representative house in Nepal's history. Madhesis will constitute close to 30 percent of the members, given that there will be almost 115 Madhesis in the PR list and tentatively 60-70 elected Madhesis through FPTP.

Most will win as members of the bigger national parties. But that does not mean, as Madhesi parties would like us to believe, that they are all Pahadi dalals. The radicalisation in the Tarai means that even these

representatives will be forced to take into account popular expectations, develop cross-party alliances on common issues like the shape and powers of federal units, and speak up.

If they fail to do so, however, or if the party leadership refuses to take their voices into account, it will deepen the alienation of the people. The Madhesi parties and armed groups will once again monopolise the space to speak on Madhesi issues.

The MJF, TMLP and SP may not fare well enough to justify their bluster over the past few months, but it is important for Kathmandu to show magnanimity and incorporate them in the post-poll power structure. Giving them a stake in both the constituent assembly process and the government will make Madhesi parties less irresponsible and send a symbolic gesture to the Tarai. It is time to think of a Madhesi chairing the constituent assembly.

The most important battle will now be the shape of the federal structure. None of the actors, except possibly the Maoists, have done any homework on the issue. Madhesi parties know one Madhes is not possible but see it as an effective ploy to counter attempts by Kathmandu to stick to the present vertical development zone model. The dynamics among Madhesi parties in the assembly will be a mix of cooperation and conflict.

They will cooperate to oppose centralisation, but there will be conflict that will stem from caste rivalries, differences in political ideologies, and because leaders are already competing to become the first chief minister of the Madhes.

Politics never works in a linear manner. The Madhes, like the rest of the country, is really at the crossroads. A bumpy but progressive road lies ahead if all actors stay the course, learn lessons of the past year, recognise issues of Madhesi identity and representation, build reformed state institutions, reconcile caste diversities and conceive of ways to implement a federal system as soon as possible.

On the other hand, militant radicalisation, Pahadi-Madhesi polarisation, caste wars, institutional breakdown and a prolonged armed conflict could complicate matters. 10 April and its aftermath will determine which path the Madhes will take. ●

Fear and voting in the Tarai

Madhesi parties pick up steam, amidst fear of violence

PRASHANT JHA in GAUR

At 33, Ajay Gupta has come a full circle. After starting out as a Sadbhabana activist, quitting the party when Badri Mandal and Anandi Debi split, winning the royal municipal elections to become Gaur mayor as an independent, allegedly encouraging the massacre of Maoists last year, and joining the TMLP for two months, Gupta has returned to Sadbhabana as their candidate for Rautahat 1.

Still, Gupta says: "I have been consistent and never joined any big party."

On campaign trail at the Barharva village he speaks to a group of men playing cards and smoking bidis. "There are two parties in the country, Pahadis and Madhesis. Vote for me, otherwise we will have to live as slaves for another 100 years."

Gupta visits women at home, asking them to pat him on his back. He tells the young that only a Madhes sarkar can create jobs so that they do not need to go to Punjab, and among his accomplishments cites an "international" cricket tournament he organised as mayor.

Gupta is banking on votes from the municipality and support of the young across castes. "I will get 8,000 votes from Gaur, five or six thousand from nearby villages," he predicts. But he faces competition from NC's Braj Kishore Singh, UML's Rewant Jha, formerly a secretary to Madhab Nepal, and the MJF's Amar Yadav.

Gupta's bright prospects represent a change in electoral dynamics from Rautahat to Sunsari over the past two weeks. Madhesi parties are finally picking up steam, with more active campaigning. They are making inroads in most seats in the eastern Tarai. The question

is, can they capitalise on it in the last three days?

The MJF was relatively strong, but the TMLP and SP are also picking up. For its part, NC is facing an uphill battle in most areas of its traditional vote banks in the eastern Tarai, especially in Dhanusha, Siraha, Saptari and Sunsari.

Across the region, however, there is also fear and apprehension. The failure of talks with the four minor militant groups, Biratnagar mosque attack, blasts in Rajbiraj, Janakpur and Birganj, and Jwala Singh's threatened disruptions have caused worry.

"You really think polls will happen? Won't people be scared to vote once the banda begins?" asks Indresh Jha, a Janakpur hotel manager. Journalist Alok Thakur says, "Most people either say elections will not happen or that they will not vote."

A low turnout will help those who want to question the legitimacy of the process later, and this seems to be what the armed groups want. Jwala sources told *Nepali Times* they will kill and kidnap a few candidates next week.

"We do not have the capacity to stop polls but want to create fear," he said bluntly. Jwala is trying to patch up with Goit's group. And royalists are threatening more blasts to provoke communal violence. ●



RAJESH MISHRA

Amresh vs Mahanta

SARLAHI—The face of the Madhesi movement is running a neck-to-neck race against a man instrumental in the peace process here in Constituency 6 of Sarlahi.

The NC's Amresh Singh may not be very well known, but he is powerful. A favourite of Indian ambassadors Shyam Saran and Shiv Shankar Mukherjee, he has been an intermediary in the peace process from November 2005 onwards. Trouble is, Mahanta Thakur is also Delhi's man in Madhesi politics.

The even greater irony is that Thakur had a lot to do with Singh's success story.

"Amresh was Thakur's sycophant," quips Deepak Mishra in Thakur's Brahmin stronghold of Laxmanpur in this eastern Tarai district. When asked to comment Singh told *Nepali Times*: "I also helped him, and he had independent access to Girijababu."

Singh was a student at

Delhi's JNU, and after the king's coup of 1 February 2005 introduced Nepali political exiles to the Indian bureaucracy. From messenger, Singh soon became a player in talks between Koirala, Prachanda and India. A confidante of Home Minister Krishna Sitaula, he was nominated into the interim legislature.

Singh is rumoured to have encouraged Thakur to quit the NC, but he himself stuck it out in the party. Thakur loyalists see this as a "betrayal and anti-Madhesi act". Singh counters it was Thakur who betrayed him, by promising he would stand in PR but filing his nomination.

At Balra village, telephone booth owner Raja Ram has got the caste politics all figured out. "Brahmins will vote for Thakur, Bhumihars for Singh. Rajputs will split. The Mahato, Sahani and Dalit vote is going for Singh. Yadavs will go to MJF's Shiv Pujan Yadav," he says. Others however believe Thakur

will win easily. Malangwa journalist Rajesh Mishra says, "Thakurji will sail through because of his image, work and credentials."

Even a local sitting at the Balra tea-shop, Ali, knows who is who. He tells us: "Amresh has the blessings of the ambassador."

As elections draw closer, the rhetoric is getting sharper. Thakur camp accuses Singh of spending money to buy voters, and planning to capture booths with the complicity of "his friend Sitaula". Singh retorts: "Mahantaji has ten cars and is using armed groups to threaten me."

Singh may be forced to court the MJF. But because Thakur's defeat will embolden Upendra Yadav who is not Delhi's favourite, Lainchour may like to see Thakur win. If that happens, Amresh Singh could still be accommodated in the prime minister's quota of 26 members. ●

Prashant Jha in Sarlahi



Messy but necessary

Secret Ballot reminds us why elections are important

An unidentified parcel dropped from an aeroplane drifts ponderously from a parachute. The opening shot of Babak Payami's *Secret Ballot* is indicative of the gentle hold the film intends to cast on its viewer. It delicately lures your attention with quiet humour and ironic questions about one of the most revered institutions in our times.

We soon learn, if the title wasn't enough of a clue, that the parcel is related to an election. In fact it carries the ballot box that will hold the votes of a remote, sleepy island off Iran's coast, along with instructions to its recipient—a very surly soldier played by Cyrus Abidi—to escort the election agent through the island. Not too excited with the change of routine to begin with, the agent (Nassim Abdi) who shows up turns out to be a woman, which only increases the soldier's scepticism about the electoral exercise. Nassim Abdi's character is both the champion and the instrument of elections, her bounding optimism and authorised entitlement overruling Cyrus Abidi's objections. The soldier is drafted to play chauffeur—and critic—to the agent and her roving voting post.

Secret Ballot nimbly interrogates the nature of democracy. The agent is fixated on regulation and the appearance of order in a heroic battle against the messy realities of collecting votes. Episodically, the soldier and agent are confronted with situations which illuminate another complication or contradiction of her project. In one instance, an unseen matriarch oversees a settlement of renegade farmers abiding by their own governance, hinting that distant elections may make little difference here. In another, a group of enthusiastic voters cannot recognise the names of the approved list of candidates. The series of variations on this theme both poke fun at and confirm the importance of elections.

The quiet humour is propelled by the dynamics of Cyrus Abidi and Nassim Abdi's mutual antagonism. Over the course of the film, Cyrus Abidi's character changes from sceptic to believer, but the soldier, whose main occupation was chasing smugglers, has the propensity to shoot at anyone who runs away from him, a habit ill-suited to the agent's aims. Their exchanges—sometimes haranguing each other, other times teasing and almost flirtatious—provide some of the surest chuckles, but also sketch the doubts that beset the agent. Nassim Abdi's enduring optimism seems in equal parts faith and performance, as she finds she may have to smudge some of her ideals to reach her goal.

Secret Ballot has a slow pulse that quickens slightly towards its end with anxieties that the agent will not be able to return with her votes in time, rendering her effort, and consequently her purpose, futile. But this twist is little more than a flimsy narrative structure to hold together a meditation on democracy's totemic practice: the act of voting. Imperfect and uncertain, yet meaningful and vital, it is that act the film ultimately affirms.

This modest entry in the annals of Iranian New Wave films is a few years old now. But in our own electoral times, *Secret Ballot* seems apt to remind us how messy yet critical elections are. And its lightly-posed questions will leave you pondering for some time after. ●

Secret Ballot
Director: Babak Payami
Cast: Nassim Abdi, Cyrus Abidi.
2001. R. 105 min.



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ABOUT TOWN

EXHIBITIONS

- ❖ **Smiling state** a smiling portfolio of Nepali leaders by Pushpa KC, at Gallery 32, until 10 April, 10AM-6PM. 4241942
- ❖ **Passing Through** paintings by Pramila Bajracharya, until 6 April, 11AM-5PM at Park Gallery, Lazimpat. 4419353
- ❖ **Collection One** paintings by Amir and Anup Chitrakar, until 10 May, at the Saturday Café, Boudha. 9851106626

EVENTS

- ❖ **Naya Barsha Party** 4 April, 7 PM at the Alliance Francaise, Rs 100 with a complimentary drink.
- ❖ **India Education Expo 2008** at the Direction Exhibition and Convention Centre, United World Trade Centre, 4-6 April.
- ❖ **Nostalgia Nite** with songs from the 60s-80s, live music by Dinesh Rai, Jyoti Ghimire, Pravin Manandhar and Sonam Tshering, 7PM, on 5 April at the Pulchok Bakery Café, Rs 1,200 per couple.
- ❖ **Weekly human rights** film screenings with *Newsroom Bahira* a film by Dilbhusan Pathak at the Sama Theatre, Gurukul, 5PM on 30 March. 4466956

MUSIC

- ❖ **Bobin and friends** performing live at Jatra, Thamel, 4 April.
- ❖ **Rudra night** fusion and classical Nepali music by Shyam Nepali and friends, every Friday, 7PM at Le Meridien, Gokarna. 4451212
- ❖ **Sufi music** by Hemanta Rana, every Friday at 7.30 PM at Dhaba Restaurant and Bar, Thapathali.
- ❖ **Yankey and friends** live acoustic music every Friday at the Bourbon room Restro-bar, Lal Darbar.
- ❖ **Anil Shahi** every Wednesday and Rashmi Singh every Friday, live at the Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayani Complex, 8PM. 5521408

DINING

- ❖ **The Kaiser Café open now** at the Garden of Dreams, operated by Dwarika's Group of Hotels, open from 9AM-10PM. 4425341
- ❖ **Steak escape** with Kathmandu's premier steaks available for lunch and dinner at the Olive Bar and Bistro, Hotel Radisson. 4411818
- ❖ **Jalan Jalan Restaurant** with a new Italian menu, Kupondole. 5544872
- ❖ **Cocktails and grooves** with jazz by Inner Groove at Fusion-the bar at Dwarika's, every Wednesday, at Dwarika's Hotel.
- ❖ **Cocktails, mocktails and liqueurs** at the Asahi Lounge, opening hours 1-10PM, above Himalayan Java, Thamel.
- ❖ **Continental and Chinese** cuisine and complimentary fresh brewed coffee after every meal a Zest Restaurant and Bar, Pulchok.
- ❖ **Illy espresso coffee** at the Galleria cafe, every Friday espresso cocktails.
- ❖ **International buffet** at the Sunrise Café, and Russian specialties at Chimney, Hotel Yak and Yeti. 4248999
- ❖ **Salmon promotion** with salmon delicacies at the Rox Restaurant, Hyatt Regency, from 7PM onwards. 4489361
- ❖ **Saturday special** barbeque, sekuwa, momos, dal-bhat at The Tea House Inn, Windy Hills, Nagarkot every Saturday. 9841250848.
- ❖ **Dice-licious brunch** at Kakori, Soaltee Crowne Plaza, roll the dice to the number of the day and get 50% discount on an individual meal, Saturdays and Sundays, 12.30-3.30 PM. 4273999
- ❖ **Scrumptious wood fired pizzas**, cocktails and specialty coffees at Roadhouse, Bhatbateni 4426587, Pulchok 5521755 and Thamel 4260187.
- ❖ **Starry night barbecue** at Hotel Shangri-la with Live performance by Ciney Gurung, Rs. 666.00 nett. per person, at the Shambala Garden, every Friday 6.30 PM onwards. 4412999
- ❖ **Calcutta's rolls, biryani, kebabs** Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 9741000735
- ❖ **Lavazza coffee** Italy's favourite coffee at La Dolce Vita, Thamel. 4700612
- ❖ **Little Britain coffee shop** fresh organic coffee, homemade cakes, WiFi internet, open all day, everyday. 4496207
- ❖ **Pizza** from the woodfired oven at Java, Thamel. 4422519

GETAWAYS

- ❖ **Relax Package** with a one night stay, full buffet breakfast at The Café and access to Club Oasis at Hyatt Regency, until 29 February, Rs 5,000 plus taxes, valid only for Nepalis and local residents. 4489800
- ❖ **Fulbari Resort and Spa, Pokhara** Rs 10,999 for Nepali double, \$219 for expat double, two days and three nights package, with transportation from the airport, drinks, tennis and swimming, discounts on food and beverages.
- ❖ **Weekend getaways at Le Meridien, Kathmandu**, Resident Night Rs 4,999 and two nights package Rs 9,998. Also includes breakfast, lunch, dinner, spa facilities, swimming pool, steam sauna, Jacuzzi and gym facilities.

For inclusion in the listing send information to editors(at)nepalitimes.com

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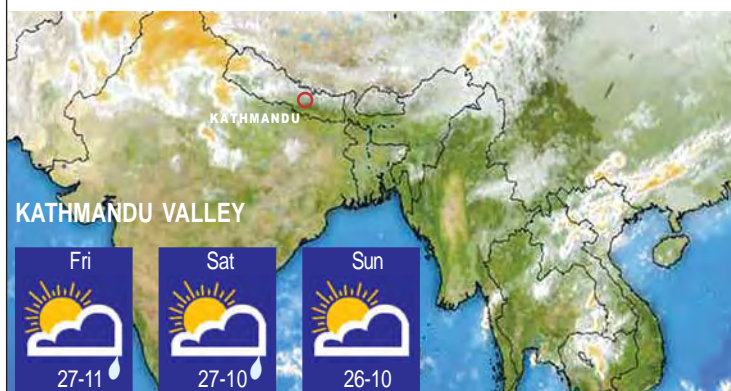
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WEEKEND WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

The chilly storm on Tuesday afternoon was the result of westerly moisture caught up in a Himalayan updraft. You can see it on Wednesday morning's satellite pictures bringing in moisture-heavy clouds from the west. A low pressure trough along the Himalayan foothills has combined with the system to produce a series of isolated storms across the midhills. Temperatures have fallen because of this. On 1 April, the Valley received 8mm of its 57mm rainfall quota for this month. Since there is still a bit of moisture in the atmosphere, expect breezy or stormy afternoons with short showers and sunny intervals, clear nights and soothing mornings.



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(संस्थापक) अखिलेश शर्मा फोन: ५५२३४२४२, ५५२३४२४३, ५५२३४२४४, ५५२३४२४५, ५५२३४२४६, ५५२३४२४७, ५५२३४२४८, ५५२३४२४९, ५५२३४२५०, ५५२३४२५१, ५५२३४२५२, ५५२३४२५३, ५५२३४२५४, ५५२३४२५५, ५५२३४२५६, ५५२३४२५७, ५५२३४२५८, ५५२३४२५९, ५५२३४२६०, ५५२३४२६१, ५५२३४२६२, ५५२३४२६३, ५५२३४२६४, ५५२३४२६५, ५५२३४२६६, ५५२३४२६७, ५५२३४२६८, ५५२३४२६९, ५५२३४२७०, ५५२३४२७१, ५५२३४२७२, ५५२३४२७३, ५५२३४२७४, ५५२३४२७५, ५५२३४२७६, ५५२३४२७७, ५५२३४२७८, ५५२३४२७९, ५५२३४२८०, ५५२३४२८१, ५५२३४२८२, ५५२३४२८३, ५५२३४२८४, ५५२३४२८५, ५५२३४२८६, ५५२३४२८७, ५५२३४२८८, ५५२३४२८९, ५५२३४२९०, ५५२३४२९१, ५५२३४२९२, ५५२३४२९३, ५५२३४२९४, ५५२३४२९५, ५५२३४२९६, ५५२३४२९७, ५५२३४२९८, ५५२३४२९९, ५५२३४३००, ५५२३४३०१, ५५२३४३०२, ५५२३४३०३, ५५२३४३०४, ५५२३४३०५, ५५२३४३०६, ५५२३४३०७, ५५२३४३०८, ५५२३४३०९, ५५२३४३१०, ५५२३४३११, ५५२३४३१२, ५५२३४३१३, ५५२३४३१४, ५५२३४३१५, ५५२३४३१६, ५५२३४३१७, ५५२३४३१८, ५५२३४३१९, ५५२३४३२०, ५५२३४३२१, ५५२३४३२२, ५५२३४३२३, ५५२३४३२४, ५५२३४३२५, ५५२३४३२६, ५५२३४३२७, ५५२३४३२८, ५५२३४३२९, ५५२३४३३०, ५५२३४३३१, ५५२३४३३२, ५५२३४३३३, ५५२३४३३४, ५५२३४३३५, ५५२३४३३६, ५५२३४३३७, ५५२३४३३८, ५५२३४३३९, ५५२३४३४०, ५५२३४३४१, ५५२३४३४२, ५५२३४३४३, ५५२३४३४४, ५५२३४३४५, ५५२३४३४६, ५५२३४३४७, ५५२३४३४८, ५५२३४३४९, ५५२३४३५०, ५५२३४३५१, ५५२३४३५२, ५५२३४३५३, ५५२३४३५४, ५५२३४३५५, ५५२३४३५६, ५५२३४३५७, ५५२३४३५८, ५५२३४३५९, ५५२३४३६०, ५५२३४३६१, ५५२३४३६२, ५५२३४३६३, ५५२३४३६४, ५५२३४३६५, ५५२३४३६६, ५५२३४३६७, ५५२३४३६८, ५५२३४३६९, ५५२३४३७०, ५५२३४३७१, ५५२३४३७२, ५५२३४३७३, ५५२३४३७४, ५५२३४३७५, ५५२३४३७६, ५५२३४३७७, ५५२३४३७८, ५५२३४३७९, ५५२३४३८०, ५५२३४३८१, ५५२३४३८२, ५५२३४३८३, ५५२३४३८४, ५५२३४३८५, ५५२३४३८६, ५५२३४३८७, ५५२३४३८८, ५५२३४३८९, ५५२३४३९०, ५५२३४३९१, ५५२३४३९२, ५५२३४३९३, ५५२३४३९४, ५५२३४३९५, ५५२३४३९६, ५५२३४३९७, ५५२३४३९८, ५५२३४३९९, ५५२३४४००, ५५२३४४०१, ५५२३४४०२, ५५२३४४०३, ५५२३४४०४, ५५२३४४०५, ५५२३४४०६, ५५२३४४०७, ५५२३४४०८, ५५२३४४०९, ५५२३४४१०, ५५२३४४११, ५५२३४४१२, ५५२३४४१३, ५५२३४४१४, ५५२३४४१५, ५५२३४४१६, ५५२३४४१७, ५५२३४४१८, ५५२३४४१९, ५५२३४४२०, ५५२३४४२१, ५५२३४४२२, ५५२३४४२३, ५५२३४४२४, ५५२३४४२५, ५५२३४४२६, ५५२३४४२७, ५५२३४४२८, ५५२३४४२९, ५५२३४४३०, ५५२३४४३१, ५५२३४४३२, ५५२३४४३३, ५५२३४४३४, ५५२३४४३५, ५५२३४४३६, ५५२३४४३७, ५५२३४४३८, ५५२३४४३९, ५५२३४४४०, ५५२३४४४१, ५५२३४४४२, ५५२३४४४३, ५५२३४४४४, ५५२३४४४५, ५५२३४४४६, ५५२३४४४७, ५५२३४४४८, ५५२३४४४९, ५५२३४४५०, ५५२३४४५१, ५५२३४४५२, ५५२३४४५३, ५५२३४४५४, ५५२३४४५५, ५५२३४४५६, ५५२३४४५७, ५५२३४४५८, ५५२३४४५९, ५५२३४४६०, ५५२३४४६१, ५५२३४४६२, ५५२३४४६३, ५५२३४४६४, ५५२३४४६५, ५५२३४४६६, ५५२३४४६७, ५५२३४४६८, ५५२३४४६९, ५५२३४४७०, ५५२३४४७१, ५५२३४४७२, ५५२३४४७३, ५५२३४४७४, ५५२३४४७५, ५५२३४४७६, ५५२३४४७७, ५५२३४४७८, ५५२३४४७९, ५५२३४४८०, ५५२३४४८१, ५५२३४४८२, ५५२३४४८३, ५५२३४४८४, ५५२३४४८५, ५५२३४४८६, ५५२३४४८७, ५५२३४४८८, ५५२३४४८९, ५५२३४४९०, ५५२३४४९१, ५५२३४४९२, ५५२३४४९३, ५५२३४४९४, ५५२३४४९५, ५५२३४४९६, ५५२३४४९७, ५५२३४४९८, ५५२३४४९९, ५५२३४५००, ५५२३४५०१, ५५२३४५०२, ५५२३४५०३, ५५२३४५०४, ५५२३४५०५, ५५२३४५०६, ५५२३४५०७, ५५२३४५०८, ५५२३४५०९, ५५२३४५१०, ५५२३४५११, ५५२३४५१२, ५५२३४५१३, ५५२३४५१४, ५५२३४५१५, ५५२३४५१६, ५५२३४५१७, ५५२३४५१८, ५५२३४५१९, ५५२३४५२०, ५५२३४५२१, ५५२३४५२२, ५५२३४५२३, ५५२३४५२४, ५५२३४५२५, ५५२३४५२६, ५५२३४५२७, ५५२३४५२८, ५५२३४५२९, ५५२३४५३०, ५५२३४५३१, ५५२३४५३२, ५५२३४५३३, ५५२३४५३४, ५५२३४५३५, ५५२३४५३६, ५५२३४५३७, ५५२३४५३८, ५५२३४५३९, ५५२३४५४०, ५५२३४५४१, ५५२३४५४२, ५५२३४५४३, ५५२३४५४४, ५५२३४५४५, ५५२३४५४६, ५५२३४५४७, ५५२३४५४८, ५५२३४५४९, ५५२३४५५०, ५५२३४५५१, ५५२३४५५२, ५५२३४५५३, ५५२३४५५४, ५५२३४५५५, ५५२३४५५६, ५५२३४५५७, ५५२३४५५८, ५५२३४५५९, ५५२३४५६०, ५५२३४५६१, ५५२३४५६२, ५५२३४५६३, ५५२३४५६४, ५५२३४५६५, ५५२३४५६६, ५५२३४५६७, ५५२३४५६८, ५५२३४५६९, ५५२३४५७०, ५५२३४५७१, ५५२३४५७२, ५५२३४५७३, ५५२३४५७४, ५५२३४५७५, ५५२३४५७६, ५५२३४५७७, ५५२३४५७८, ५५२३४५७९, ५५२३४५८०, ५५२३४५८१, ५५२३४५८२, ५५२३४५८३, ५५२३४५८४, ५५२३४५८५, ५५२३४५८६, ५५२३४५८७, ५५२३४५८८, ५५२३४५८९, ५५२३४५९०, ५५२३४५९१, ५५२३४५९२, ५५२३४५९३, ५५२३४५९४, ५५२३४५९५, ५५२३४५९६, ५५२३४५९७, ५५२३४५९८, ५५२३४५९९, ५५२३४६००, ५५२३४६०१, ५५२३४६०२, ५५२३४६०३, ५५२३४६०४, ५५२३४६०५, ५५२३४६०६, ५५२३४६०७, ५५२३४६०८, ५५२३४६०९, ५५२३४६१०, ५५२३४६११, ५५२३४६१२, ५५२३४६१३, ५५२३४६१४, ५५२३४६१५, ५५२३४६१६, ५५२३४६१७, ५५२३४६१८, ५५२३४६१९, ५५२३४६२०, ५५२३४६२१, ५५२३४६२२, ५५२३४६२३, ५५२३४६२४, ५५२३४६२५, ५५२३४६२६, ५५२३४६२७, ५५२३४६२८, ५५२३४६२९, ५५२३४६३०, ५५२३४६३१, ५५२३४६३२, ५५२३४६३३, ५५२३४६३४, ५५२३४६३५, ५५२३४६३६, ५५२३४६३७, ५५२३४६३८, ५५२३४६३९, ५५२३४६४०, ५५२३४६४१, ५५२३४६४२, ५५२३४६४३, ५५२३४६४४, ५५२३४६४५, ५५२३४६४६, ५५२३४६४७, ५५२३४६४८, ५५२३४६४९, ५५२३४६५०, ५५२३४६५१, ५५२३४६५२, ५५२३४६५३, ५५२३४६५४, ५५२३४६५५, ५५२३४६५६, ५५२३४६५७, ५५२३४६५८, ५५२३४६५९, ५५२३४६६०, ५५२३४६६१, ५५२३४६६२, ५५२३४६६३, ५५२३४६६४, ५५२३४६६५, ५५२३४६६६, ५५२३४६६७, ५५२३४६६८, ५५२३४६६९, ५५२३४६७०, ५५२३४६७१, ५५२३४६७२, ५५२३४६७३, ५५२३४६७४, ५५२३४६७५, ५५२३४६७६, ५५२३४६७७, ५५२३४६७८, ५५२३४६७९, ५५२३४६८०, ५५२३४६८१, ५५२३४६८२, ५५२३४६८३, ५५२३४६८४, ५५२३४६८५, ५५२३४६८६, ५५२३४६८७, ५५२३४६८८, ५५२३४६८९, ५५२३४६९०, ५५२३४६९१, ५५२३४६९२, ५५२३४६९३, ५५२३४६९४, ५५२३४६९५, ५५२३४६९६, ५५२३४६९७, ५५२३४६९८, ५५२३४६९९, ५५२३४७००, ५५२३४७०१, ५५२३४७०२, ५५२३४७०३, ५५२३४७०४, ५५२३४७०५, ५५२३४७०६, ५५२३४७०७, ५५२३४७०८, ५५२३४७०९, ५५२३४७१०, ५५२३४७११, ५५२३४७१२, ५५२३४७१३, ५५२३४७१४, ५५२३४७१५, ५५२३४७१६, ५५२३४७१७, ५५२३४७१८, ५५२३४७१९, ५५२३४७२०, ५५२३४७२१, ५५२३४७२२, ५५२३४



MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

“DALAI CLIQUE”: Chinese ambassador (*right*) addresses a press conference on Wednesday about the unrest in Tibet. Assembled journalists were shown video footage of Tibetans attacking Chinese-owned shops in Lhasa on 14 March.



DEEPENDRA BAJRACHARYA

INTERCESSION: Tibetan monks at the Helmu Office, Boudha, chant prayers on Wednesday for those who lost their lives in the Lhasa protests. Monks continued their protests this week and demonstrated outside the Chinese Embassy.



KIRAN PANDAY

NEW CONTRAPTION: Election commission staff demonstrate an electronic voting machine this week. The machines will be used in constituency Kathmandu-1. This is the first election in Nepal that will include electronic voting.



KIRAN PANDAY

POLITICS IS FUN: A woman dances at the Maoist rally in Khula Manch on Wednesday. The rally was equipped with a pumping sound system.

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CRAYONS/08

First past the toast

As elections approach, the government has announced a Dasain-style weeklong hibernation. The idea is to depend on the traditional Nepali habit of playing marathon card games, drinking ourselves unconscious with **beer-seer** and **wine-swine** so that electoral violence can be reduced to minima. Can't go around beating up candidates if you are so drunk you can't even stand up straight now can you?

But all governments are spoilsports, and ours is no exception. An April Fool spoof in a highly-respected English daily apparently gave the Election Commission the idea that it should indeed declare the country dry in the final week before voting. No worries, though, we have the whole weekend to stock up on **booze-sooze** so you can be first past the toast.

ॐ

OK, now that we have got the liquidity crisis sorted out, let's move on to the next item on the agenda which is Comrade Laldhoj's assertion that the reds will under no circumstances lose the election. "There is no chance we will lose, it is impossible," he told a campaign rally this week, "which means we won't have to carry out our threat of capturing Narayanhiti if we do." Thank god for that, because Comrade Shock and Awe had us all worried that he was really going to invade India and America if he lost his seat.

The Ass is a bit slow, as you may have noticed by now, which is why it took some time to understand why there was an escalation of electoral violence as soon as the tripartite Maoist-UML-NC talks on seat distribution failed. Hence, UML candidates are having their skulls fractured and bones pulverised--it is all to put pressure on MKN and GPK to agree on PKD's formula of an electoral bandand and talmel.

Under this, the NC and the UML would agree to let 16 top Maoist honchos "win" in at least one each of their constituencies as well as obtain at least 25 percent of the seats. Comrade Fearsomeness' tactics seem to have worked because now the talks are on again and the Ass's long ears have picked up signals that a deal is near. Prediction: expect poll violence to die down and a lot of Stalin-style smooching among UML and MLMPP.

ॐ

After The Fierce One's **Bolero** hit six students in Inaruwa last week and triggered moderate-intensity mayhem on the East-West Highway, El Presidente has not just switched to a slick black TATA **Safari** but has also replaced his driver with his son Prakash. There can be no one as trustworthy as the fruit of one's loins, but Crown Prince Prakash is known to be an erratic driver and has side-swiped quite a number of vehicles in Kathmandu because he is distracted by his new business partnership with the

scion of an absolute monarchist.

Speaking of which, Kingji has come down from Nagarjun and has been visiting various godmen to figure out what he should do next. They have told him not to worry and he'll remain king for a while longer. Which must be why **KG** is so cool. But in order to ensure the

longevity of the monarchy, one soothsayer advised Kingji to wear beige, turn vegetarian, and "go live near water". Godman meant Singapore, but G thinks Pokhara is also near water and will do.

ॐ

Our entire volleyball team absconded in Japan, athletes keep disappearing in Europe, even senior government officers don't return from junkets. But for the first time, Nepal's in the Indian

Army have gone **AWOL** in America. Two soldiers from the 1/1 Gorkha Rifles deserted their Ex Shatrujeet joint training exercises with the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit at Camp Pendleton in California. Could they have defected to the Maoists and become their deep penetration agents in America?

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