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-leftists 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

STATE OF THE STATE

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.

KIRAN PANDAY
Food insecurity
Cost of food increases hunger in Nepal

By now we’ve all heard about it and certainly it is at our doorsteps due to a 10 percent rise in food prices at the market these days. Growing energy expenses, competing demands on land and food demands, increases in the frequency and severity of natural disasters, variations in global weather, and changing consumption patterns in China and India are some of the reasons for the rising price of food. Coupled with other political, climatic, and geopolitical factors, this makes Nepal’s population particularly vulnerable. Drought and other natural disasters, along with the result of 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 watered the Tamil, resulting in bountiful crop. Some suggested food production finaly might be returning to normal.

Unfortunately, that optimism was short lived. Market prices for key commodities have risen sharply during the last few months. WFP estimates that the number of Nepalis struggling with food is now doubled to nearly 8 million people. General instability, civil conflict and the increasing number of bandits are contributing factors to loss of 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 early, selling assets, cutting the number of meals, using savings or seeking credit to purchase food, selling livestock, taking their children out of school.

Over the last few decades, Nepal has become a food deficit country, both per person and per hectare. The nation has 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, poor and disaster populations rely upon complex migration patterns to travel to places where economic activities and food are accessible. (see also: ‘Not just supply and demand,’ p7)

There is now a new complication 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 hunch. 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 food, on the move too much to 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, increased in the past five years to 33 percent and in some areas in the Terai, it is as high as 20 percent, which is an emergency situation according to WHO standards.

The Government of Nepal has committed itself to the importance of agriculture and food security a priority in their new Three Year Interim Plan. Yet, the challenges of achieving these goals are impossible and it and it doesn’t happen overnight. Much of Nepal’s crop land remains victimized and prone to natural disasters which can severely impact crop production, food availability and access, particularly for the most vulnerable populations.

How families already living on the edge of poverty cope with the current trend in rising prices is quite a concern.

The government, WFP and the donors must step up their efforts to implement quick-impact programs that result in long-term interventions 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 WFA is when Nepal need us anymore. (Richard Ragan is the Representative for the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) in Nepal.)

Food insecurity
By Richard Ragan

An observer observing observers
No election is either completely free or truly fair

The act of observation is inherently political. The observer has a direct effect on the object being observed. As representatives of the masses, who dominate the media, it’s time we took notice of the class, community and caste biases of the news media.

Just as a completely free, fair and credible election is an ideal, the mythical democracy, who knows, they may behave like mature politicians by their actions. It is still not too late to stand up for the media.

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 theCongress, the radical left and right, the totalitarian ideals have seen democrats as their main enemy. The two have often collided to squeeze the middle.

The Maoists were taken 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 ruled 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 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 is not 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 it. Some ultra-Maoists have turned to disruptive voting. There may not be collusion yet between these militias 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 Bhatacar on Saturday. With nothing left to lose, this lunatic fringe of Nepali politics may want to take the country with it.

Ultra-radical Maoists, who always felt their leaders snatched their own victory, now mean business. Nepal may see its first Maoist single party and deprivation of a fairly decent showing in the polls. Indians are left wondering that Nepal’s armed groups, including Maoists, are still capable of sitting in the sidelines and condemn YCL cadres that dominate the media and deprive it of a fairly decent showing in the polls. Indians are left wondering that the Maoists are still capable of sitting in the sidelines and condemn YCL cadres that dominate the media and deprive it of a fairly decent showing in the polls.

The Maoists are aiding and abetting the absolute monarchists by their actions. It is still not too late to stand up for the media.

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The observer has a direct role. It is still not too late to stand up for the media.

The poor rarely have representation. As argued last week in this space (‘Their own worst enemy’, PA) armed groups, including Maoists, is often considered as formal election observation committees. Let’s face facts: with a war-weary public, it is almost impossible to get someone to give the national elections an unbiased committee.

Nothing new there, no election is either completely free or truly fair. Establishmentarian forces closing the faux-commies crying wolf. We will have to tolerate those with power: political parties, journalists, armed groups, extremists, and election officers. The poor rarely have representation. (Richard Ragan is the Representative for the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) in Nepal.)

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-ballot assessment of government machinery. It also includes the task of understanding social processes at work. The impacts 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 power: political parties, armed groups, extremists, and election officers. The poor rarely have representation. (Richard Ragan is the Representative for the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) in Nepal.)

The lack of food is most obvious in Nepal’s children. The latest National Demographic Health Survey finds the number of children under five are underweight. Stunting rates for children under five in Nepal are 49 percent. Wasting, a measure of acute malnutrition, increased in the past five years to 33 percent and in some areas in the Terai, it is as high as 20 percent, which is an emergency situation according to WHO standards.

The Government of Nepal has committed itself to the importance of agriculture and food security as a priority in their new Three Year Interim Plan. Yet, the challenges of achieving these goals are impossible and it and it doesn’t happen overnight. Much of Nepal’s crop land remains victimized and prone to natural disasters which can severely impact crop production, food availability and access, particularly for the most vulnerable populations.

How families already living on the edge of poverty cope with the current trend in rising prices is quite a concern.

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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 Momo. 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

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

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 forge 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

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RAISING THE BAR HIGHER

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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 as a priority with pragmatism and not nationalism. This is logical since the NC’s Gyamendra 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 hydro power 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 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.

Minister Karki told Nepal Times: “The journey to making Nepal prosper and the Maoists are taking the lead. 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 fought with delays. Upper Karnali and Arun III will be built and operated by foreign companies before they are ultimately handed back to Nepal. Until then Nepal will get free electricity for it’s cost and ultimately handed back to Nepal.

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MoWR officials say it’s a win-win for Nepal as projects like Upper Karnali, Arun III, Budi Gandagi 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, Nepal will get jobs and we will be making money exporting power,” said Energy Secretary Pradip Kumar Shrestha. “The MoUs for export projects have been approved, and another is pending—all in the past six months and all to Indian private sector firms.”

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 Arup Upadhyay, MoWR joint secretary. “We will have committed finance before we meet our own power supply,” says energy expert Ratna Min Ram Rijal.

Large projects in Nepal are fought 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 have 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 MoUs with the Indian-Italian-Thai consortium (CMR-FTI) 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 Min Ram Rijal.

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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 calls 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?

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BoK in Dang
Bank of Kathmandu (BoK) in Dang has opened its new branch at the一定是万村. 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 25th board meeting. Swaroop is the regional chief of the 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 or 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.

ECONOMIC SENSE
Artha Beed
We need to understand why we love to ‘dodge’ work. Even at the highest levels of government, discussions are not focused on making the constituent assembly functionally effective, 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 given the opportunity. 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.

Another Dasain
Avoiding work is Nepal’s national hallmark

T he 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 Chaiti this year. Seeing as anthropologists love multi-ethnic and exotic Nepal so much, they might as well do us a favour and have some studies into this facet of the Nepali character.

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We cannot expect the elections to change much in administration, but we can’t do much now than hope for the best.

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Our love for festivals and breaks from doing nothing has given the opportunity. 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.

Another Dasain
Avoiding work is Nepal’s national hallmark

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Mindless
Editorial in Gorkhapatra, 31 March
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 jeopardize 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
A complaint has been filed against Minister of Physical Planning and Works Hilsa 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. Hilsa 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
UML general secretary Madhav 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 wins 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 monarchists, 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...
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, head 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. Mamayama Gir 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.
In 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. 

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 Birod 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 foods. 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 
-Jawalakhel -Boudha Main Street 
Saleways Department Store -Jawalakhel 
Namaste Supermarket -Pulchok -Maharajganj, 
Bluebird Department Store -Tripureswor 
-Lazimpat 

****
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 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 shortages (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 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.

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Pabitra Bajracharya, president of Retailers’ Association said that 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 admission 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.

In these regions, average household food stocks are down by half compared to a year ago. Many areas in the Mid and Far West have had bad winter harvests and are facing growing food deficit. “Inadequate supply and price increases in food and non-food items have had a significant impact on the overall food security situation,” the report states.

Dewan Rai
Some are still more equal

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

DEWAN RAI

T he 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 Patik Thapa told Nepali Times. Although party candidate lists for this election feature more women, Madhesis, Janajatis and Dalits than in previous elections, Janajatis and Dalits will not be fairly represented.

Despite promises of inclusion, women are sidelined again

Aarthi Lavmi Shrestha’s entourage passes by. Lavmi 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 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.

Hinala Yami, Maoist candidate for Kathmandu-7, is confident that more women MPs will make a difference in terms of gender. “I will vote for a woman candidate,” she says resolutely, and looks on as UML candidate Hisila Yami, Maoist candidate for Kathmandu-7, is confident that more women MPs will make a difference in terms of gender.

But politicians from other parties are not convinced. “It is a 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-seated patriarchy screens out women who are proactive, capable, and smart,” she says.

The PR vote may also not be as democratic as it should be. 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.

And what about youth?

W ith 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?

Talking to Nepal 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 CPA-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 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.

MALLIKA ARYAL

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Population</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Tamang</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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The Janjati candidate breakdown (%)

<table>
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<td>Dalit</td>
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The Other population breakdown (%)

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The total electorate is 51 percent youth, with the youth under PR being 35, who form 51 percent of the total electorate.

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But it is clear that only a few 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.

Hinala Yami, Maoist candidate for Kathmandu-7, is confident that more women MPs will make a difference in terms of gender. “I will vote for a woman candidate,” she says resolutely, and looks on as UML candidate Hisila Yami, Maoist candidate for Kathmandu-7, is confident that more women MPs will make a difference in terms of gender.

But politicians from other parties are not convinced. “It is a 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-seated patriarchy screens out women who are proactive, capable, and smart,” she says.

The PR vote may also not be as democratic as it should be. 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 17.8 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 69 registered Janajati groups, only 11 have candidates at all in the CA polls. Sociologist and Janajati activist Krishna Bhattachan explains: “It is practically 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 146 (25 percent) and 30 (5 percent) respectively. Each of these parties is fielding a total of 575 candidates.

Although 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 Newars, 62 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, lists from which they are on in are 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 list 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. The NC 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 Bahunas and Chhetris also feel excluded by the score 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’,” he says.

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.

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 guaranteed a seat. “Women who were sure to win from their area have not been allowed to contest in FPTP, and those who were selected are either contesting in places where they have no influence, or in strongholds of other political parties,” Shakya says.

Kopilia 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 pressurising the political parties to recommend names of women for top positions, organising an inclusive national 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.”

Sticking it out

Bhairawa’s businessmen pack 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 Beriwals’ Rs 40 million plywood factory. The 53-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.

Agrawal 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.

Agrawal 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,” Agrawal 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 in 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. Agrawal moved himself and his family to India for good after the JMM demanded money. When he refused to pay up, they bombed his home and factories.
Fear and voting in the Tarai
Madhesi parties pick up steam, amidst fear of violence

PRASHANT JHA in GAUR

A 34. Ajay Gupta has come full circle. After starting out as a Sadbhavana activist, quitting the party when Bhatta Mandal and Anandol Delhi split, winning the royalist municipal elections to become Mayor in Sarlahi, and jointing the TMLP for two months, Gupta has returned to Sadbhavana as their candidate for Rastahat 1.

Gupta is banking on votes from the municipal and support of the young across castes. “I’ll get 6,000 voters from Gaur, five or six thousand from nearby villages,” he predicts. But he faces competition from NC’s Raja Kishor Singh, UML’s Rewant Jha, former secretary to Madhus, Nepal, and the MJF’s Manoj Yadav.

Gupta’s bright prospects represent a change in electoral dynamics from Rastahat to Sunamari 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 Dhankuta, Siraha, Saptari and Sunamari.

Across the region, however, there is also fear and apprehension. The failure of talks with the four major groups, Birhanagar mosque attack, blasts in Janakpur, Janakpur and Birgunj, and Jwala Singh’s threatened disruptions have caused worry.

“You really think polls will happen? Won’t people be scared to vote once the bandh begins?” asks Indresh Chauhan, a Janakpur hotel manager. Journalist Alok Thakur says: “Most people either will not elect or 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 tell Nepal Times that they will 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 put up with Guf’s group. And is making more threatening blasts to provoke communal violence.

SARLAP—The face of the Madhes movement is running a neck-to-neck race against a man instrumental in the peace process here in Constituency 6 of Sunahra.

The NC’s Amresh Singh may not be very well known, but he is powerful. A favourite of Indian ambassadors Shayam 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 Mahanta’s politics.

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. Madhes parties know the shape is not possible but see it as an effective play 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 prime minister of the Madhes.

Politics never works in a linear manner. The Madhes, like the rest of the country, are really at the crossroads. A buggy but progressive road lies ahead if all actors stay the course, learn lessons from the past year, recognise issues of Madhes identity and development, 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.

Amresh Singh will win easily, Malangeya journalist Ramesh Mishra says, “Thakuri 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 can accuse Singh of spending money to buy votes, and planning to capture booths with the complicity of ‘his friend Sinhawa’. Singh retorts: “Mahantaji hates 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 and Amresh to question Singh’s favourite, Lainchauri may like to see Thakur win. If that happens, Amresh Singh could still be acceptable to the prime minister’s quota of 26 members. Prashant Jha in Sarlahi

At Kalmthana after returning for travelling for three weeks through the Tarai and Bihar, the pessimism and impending sense of doom 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 royals allying with Madhes?

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 royals and militants keen to discredit the process.

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

Most will win as members of the national parties. But that does not mean, as Madhes 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 Madhes 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 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 the shape is not possible but see it as an effective play 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.

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R
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 overriding 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.

Secret Ballot
reminds us why elections are important

Messy but necessary

CRITICAL CINEMA
A. Angelo D’Silva
ABOUT TOWN

EXHIBITIONS

- Smiling state a smiling portfolio of Nepali leaders by Pushpa KC, at Gallery 32, until 10 April. 10AM-8PM. 4241942
- Passing Through paintings by Pramila Bajracharya, until 6 April, 11AM-5PM at Park Gallery, Lazimpatri. 4419553
- Collection One paintings by Amir and Anup Chitrakar, until 10 May, at the Saturday Café, Boudha. 9851066626

EVENTS

- Naya Barsha Party 4 April, 7 PM at the Alliance Française, Rs 150 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 the songs from the 60s-80s, live music by Dinesh Rai, Jyoti Ghimire, Pravin Manandhar and Sonam Thering, 7PM, on 5 April at the Poonch Cakey Café, Rs 1,200 per couple.
- Weekly human rights film screenings with Newsroom Bahana a film by Dilbhusan Pathak at the Sama Theatre, Gorkul, 5PM on 30 March. 4469595

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 Dhaaba 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 at the Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayan Complex, 5PM. 5241048

DINING

- The Kaiser Cafe open now at the Garden of Dreams, operated by Dwarka’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.
- Starry night barbecue with salmon delicacies at the Rox Restaurant, Hyatt Regency, from 7PM onwards. 4481993
- Jalan Jalan Restaurant with a new Italian menu, Kupondole. 5344872
- Cocktails and grooves with jazz by Inner Groove at Fusion-bar at Dhaaka’s, every Wednesday at Dhaaka’s Hotel.
- Cocktails, mocktails and liqueurs at the Asahi Lounge, opening hours 1-10PM, above Himalayaan Java, Thamel.
- Continental and Chinese cuisine and complimentary fresh brewed coffee after every meal at 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. 4328989
- Salmon promotion with salmon delicacies at the Rox Restaurant, Hyatt Regency, from 7PM onwards. 4480861
- Saturday special barbeque, sekuwa, momos, dal-bhat at The Tea House Inn, Windy Hills, Nagarkot every Saturday. 9841250848.
- Dice-losive brunch at Kakori, Soalte Pad Newfa, in front of the hotel, Rs 666.00nett per person, at the Shambala Garden, every Friday 6:30 PM onward. 4412999
- Calcutta’s rolls, biryani, kebabs Indian cuisine at Bawarchi, Bluebird Mall Food Court. 9741007735
- 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 Cadil and access to Club Oasis at Hyatt Regency, until 29 February, Rs 5,000 plus taxes, valid only for Nepalis and local residents. 4499601
- 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.

ONE TWO THREE is a comedy thriller about three men who share the same name: Laxmi Narayan, Laxmi Narayan One (Tushar Kapoor) is an aspiring contract killer while Two (Suniel Shetty) is an automobile salesman from Mumbai and Three (Paresh Rawal) is a rich Indian salesman. When the three of them reach Pondy together, confusion ensues. They end up mixing up their locations and people they’re supposed to meet.

Call 4442220 for show timings at Jai Nepal www.jainepal.com

Questa Entertainment

Wrought Iron | Case | Wood

Kathmandu Valley

Weekend Weather

by NGANMINDA DAHAL

The chilly storm on Tuesday afternoon was the result of western 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 the storms. 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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“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.

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.

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.

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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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.

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 bandford 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.

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 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.

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, Nepalis 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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