It has been a week since the hung assembly declared Nepal a republic, and voters are getting restless. Political wrangling is being played out in public with threats as the parties try to improve their bargaining positions by sabre-rattling in the media. This has poisoned the atmosphere and made it more difficult to forge a consensus on the seven pre-conditions that the NC put forward to join the government. Of these, the main sticking points are whether the Maoists should get both presidential and prime ministerial positions, and whether the voting process should be with a simple or two-thirds majority.

“How can a person commanding his own separate army be a president?” asks constitutional expert Nilamber Acharya. Because Maoist chairman Pushpa Kamal Deb had already proclaimed himself president he wants both posts, but Acharya insists a party that won only one-third of the seats in the assembly has no right to make that demand.

The Maoists decided on Thursday to accept a non-political personality for presidency. But a Maoist faction wants to keep Baburam Bhattarai out at all cost, and some in the NC are rooting for Prime Minister Koirala being elevated to ceremonial president. And to complicate things even further the Maoists say they want Koirala to resign first before they form a government.

“We are even willing to consider the simple majority proposition if he steps down,” senior Maoist Ram Katu told Nepali Times. The army seems happy as long as it doesn’t have a Maoist president as commander-in-chief.

Acharya says all this is posturing, and the real issue is of power-sharing. “Once that is addressed, everything else will fall into place. The Maoists essentially have to reassure the other parties that they are a democratic, non-violent force.”

Dewan Rai and Subhas Devkota
Pushpa Kamal Dahal now has nothing left to wreck of the country is within Dahalís grasp. Even the parties. wage war. Calculative politics forced him to believing in the power of the ballot to eighties as he voted in the Referendum, these phases.

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Process of bargaining is natural given that the mandate is frustrated and calls for a degree of power sharing. It is understandable for the rhetoric of all sides is directed at their respective constituencies. And it may even turn out to be positive by institutionalising a system of checks and balances. But it has dragged on too long, got too atomicisation, halted the popular enthusiasm generated by the polls, and come to a close to subverting the mandate. All this while the suffering on the ground is increasing. It is not only the fuel crisis and rising food prices that have caused misery across the country. There has been a surge in crime in the Tarai. What is striking is that this is happening at a time when the armed groups are at their weakest with almost no political support. With Madhesi discontent finding a political channel through direct representatives, this has been the best time for a newly elected, legitimized government to act purely on the basis of their reforms and other massappealing as revolutions. A decaf carrot and stick strategy, co-opting some of the armed activists, appointing more Madhesis as CDOs and SPs, and tightening the law and order machinery, would have worked. But politically, publicly, and seeing impunity and ensuring security for citizens come very low on the list by the major parties. The NC, with the UML tailing closely, has shamelessly clung on to power and constantly shifted goalposts. Don’t these parties realise this was a vote against them? Instead of looking for reasons to explain the defeat, come out with a positive agenda, build an organisation, the NC leaders are competing among themselves to engage in meaningless anti-Maoist rhetoric. The Maoists are benefiting from this stalemate. They are misleading directly to people through rallies and corner meetings, using the same organisational structure which worked in the polls. The message is: the NC and the UML are cheating us of the right to power. The Maoists, if their rhetoric and private instructions to party cadre are any indicator, will not allow Girija to head the state. But their claim for both president and PM does not hold. If the position is to be truly ceremonial, then a compromise candidate (a Madhuri, a woman, or a Madhuri clone) may be an excellent symbolic figure.

This is what blinks first, specifically those from the NC and the UML, in order to secure a political channel for their party. But he has no thought about coverage, he should send letters to the editor. But he has no right to threaten and warn anyone. The right to criticise the government is actually a one point agreement: the Maoists agreed to accept norms of democratic conduct, the political parties promised to turn republican. The parties may have dragged their feet but they have done their bit. The Maoists, to be fair, gave up the war and have also travelled a long distance in two years. We have disagreements on the November 2005 pledge. The Maoists, for their part, are behaving as if they have an absolute majority. With one-third of the seats in parliament, one can say the Maoists were successful, but they certainly weren’t victorious. They should stop acting like they were.

The leadership must also cease making reckless references to ‘October Revolution’, ‘Peopleís Republic’ and publicly threaten the media. Explaining away these deadly serious threats by saying the otherwise, lumping itself into a joke. Everyone knows Dahal is sorely wanting in the humour department.

All the political parties should not lose sight of the goal here: writing up a new constitution in the next two years and in that period bringing some relief to the Nepali people who have undergone a brutal war and a government neglect for the past 12 years.

The Maoists have had more than enough time to make their political transition. We now want them to publicize the violence and show by words and deeds their commitment to democracy and pluralism. There can be no half-way.

Who’ll blink first?
Spare a thought for voters who thought they’d see change

Pancham’s speech at Tundikhel last Friday reinforced apprehensions about their future. He may not like Kantipur because Kantipur does not like him and his party. He never bothered to explain about coverage, he should send letters to the editor. But he has no right to threaten and warn anyone. The right to criticise the government is actually a one point agreement: the Maoists agreed to accept norms of democratic conduct, the political parties promised to turn republican. The parties may have dragged their feet but they have done their bit. The Maoists, to be fair, gave up the war and have also travelled a long distance in two years. We have disagreements on the November 2005 pledge. The Maoists, for their part, are behaving as if they have an absolute majority. With one-third of the seats in parliament, one can say the Maoists were successful, but they certainly weren’t victorious. They should stop acting like they were.

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PUBLIC’S REPUBLIC
This declaration of Nepal as a federal republic (Editorial, ‘Publicís republic’, #402) has not only stunned South Asians but also the world at large. This is the lesson from Nepal: that people can decide their fate not with bullets but with ballots. All Nepalis expect an all-inclusive Nepal free of corruption and chaos. It is the responsibility of the new leadership to translate these expectations into reality. Let us enjoy equal rights and freedom in our New Nepal.

Dhananjay Shah, Tribhuban University, Kirtipur

- In the last few days, yours is the only publication that has caught on to how irrelevant the republican agenda is to making a difference in the lives of most ordinary Nepalis (It doesnít make any difference to me if there is a raja in Kathmandu or notí, #402). What difference does a republic make when the country is in the mess it is now, and we canít even get basic necessities like petrol and cooking gas? The parties celebrated by themselves, declaring another three days of holidays. My colleagues and I worked as normal in this time to show that what we care about is getting on with our lives, not the power and personality politics of all those at the BICC.

Prasanna KC, email

- We in the outside world think you guys in Nepal are crazy. Communism has come and gone in the rest of the world. And itís now that you decide you want a dictatorship of the proletariat. Go ahead and commit suicide. We will be watching with amazement.

Name withheld, email

- Congratulations to all the representatives from the Madhes. I live also spent some years of my life in the Tarai and I could also feel the grievances of the Madhesis. But we will have to be careful to ensure that Madhesi politics are not just based on ethnicity and territory. Allowing all cultures to have a dignified existence is one of the cornerstones of free expression.

Nirmal Ghimire, Spain

- The CA election showed how our urban-based mainstream political parties became opportunists and abandoned their fundamental doctrines in order to hold on to power. The catchy sloganeering of ‘New Nepal’ has definitely made an impact upon the public. However, the common concern of all is what sort of new Nepal are we going to create? Will it really be inclusive with space for all or will it become ridden by ethnic and communal conflict? With regard to the monarchy: if a non-Hindu country, like Sri Lanka, can market Ram Setu to boost tourism, why shouldnít we Nepalis be positive about marketing a cultural king, who is believed to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, by restoring him to a non-political symbol? This would be interesting to the whole world, with New Nepal becoming a unique hybrid of republican in practice and monarchism in heritage. Canít the much-hyped New Nepal truly be inclusive in this way, by not excluding even the former king?

Pradeep Sharma, Mumbai

LETTERS
Nepal Times welcomes feedback. Letters should be brief and may be edited for space. While pseudonyms can be accepted, writers who provide their real names and contact details will be given preference. Email letters should be in text format without attachments with ëletter to the editorí in the subject line.

Email: letters(at)nepalitimes.com
Fax: 977-1-5521013
Mail: Letters, Nepali Times, GPO Box 7251, Kathmandu, Nepal.
Country air and singing bowls

The perfect rest is just half an hour from the city

Nestled amongst the green woods of Gokarna Forest is the Le Meridien Golf Resort and Spa. Although just ten minutes down the road from Chabahil, the peaceful surroundings feel many miles away from the dust, noise and chaos of the Ring Road.

Le Meridien has been conceived as a holistic centre, with a luxury hotel with 65 rooms, meeting and conference facilities for large groups, and recreation and leisure with an 18-hole golf course and spa.

The key to the resort’s tranquility is the 470 acres of grounds surrounding the resort, which include both the golf course, and an even larger area of untouched forest, full of birds and animals including monkeys and deer.

The clean and secluded environment provides the perfect atmosphere for real relaxation at the spa. Recreation and spa manager Danijela Milanovic says, “Of course a spa is about pampering and rejuvenating, but it’s not just treatment that’s important, the environment matters too.”

The Harmony Spa offers a range of relaxing and invigorating treatments, including massages, reiki cure, aromatherapy, body wraps, scrubs and rubs, and mud packs, as well as beauty treatments for both ladies and gents, including hair and facial treatments, manicures and pedicures.

It has four massage rooms, a swimming pool, jacuzzi, sauna, steam room, boutique, and gym, and is beautifully lit, and decorated with thick fabrics and fresh flowers.

Various different massages are available, including both Asian and Swedish styles, as well as the ‘Golfer’s Massage’ which blends various different massages to choose from. Shirodhara, the application of heated herbal oil on the hair root, the full body oil massage. Through the three different stages I could feel the muscles and knots in my body gradually relax and press out. But Danijela has more plans for the spa. An ‘Art of Living’ treatment said, “I feel like I’ve just come back from a faraway place.”

A day – even just a morning – at Le Meridien settles the mind and heart, preparing them for the return to the grinding hub of Kathmandu.

Tranquility amidst the chaos

Tranquility Spa at Lazimpat is located in the bustling heart of the city, but as you step in inside, the brightly-painted walls, soothing music, dimmed lights and the sweet fragrance of incense create an air of peace. Then you can leave it up to the professionally trained masseur or masseuse to pummel out the tensions from your body.

Tranquility is the latest addition to the chain of spas that was begun as a family business by the Phaiju brothers in 2005. After working at and managing spas for renowned hotels such as the Le Meridien, Hyatt Regency and Hotel Radisson, Bhuwan Phaiju, Tranquility’s chairman, wanted to do something on his own.

After facing a dearth of massage therapists during his tenure at Le Meridien, Phaiju started training interested individuals on his own, and eventually opened his own massage training centre in Boudha.

When asked why he chose to venture out on his own, Phaiju explains, “Then, spas in the big hotels only catered to rich and high-society clients. People in general did not really know about spas and massage centres, and were even suspicious of them as they had heard about what goes on in Thamel and Bangkok. I wanted to erase this negative conception and make massage services available to middle-class Nepalis and foreigners.”

Getting the centre going wasn’t easy. At first it failed to attract any students, and it was only after they promised a 100 percent job guarantee (an offer that is still applicable), that pupils started pouring in. Two months into the new business, Phaiju decided to branch out and began providing services to clients as well.

While foreigners make up a good part of Tranquility’s regular customers, the primary focus has always been on Nepali clientele. The spa offers a variety of massage therapies, a sauna and steam bath, and also beauty treatments, using almost exclusively organic materials.

There is a wide range of massages to choose from. Shirodhara, the ayurvedic body massage and aromatherapy massage are the current favourites. Shirodhara involves pouring medicated oils into the third eye in a regular flow and requires exquisite care and concentration on the part of the therapist. Although shirodhara is one of the more expensive treatments available, at Rs 4,000, it is worth every penny. An hour and a half of shirodhara will leave you feeling like a different person.

As you sip herbal tea after your treatment session, you can feel the rush of energy and vigour in your mind and body. Says Phaiju: “People opt for the spa and massages to relieve anxiety, stress and pain. At the Tranquility Spa we rejuvenate the body by pleasing the senses.”
New store

John Players has opened up another flagging store at Fusionade. The store has a collection of a range of formal and casual wear for men. John Players already operates two exclusive brand outlets at Bluebird Mall and UWTC.

Power packed Alba

Monga Auto Works has introduced the new and improved Alba ES with self starter. This 106cc 4-stroke motorcycle comes with a double cradle frame and ground clearance of 173mm. The Alba ES is available in two colours: black and red. Offered a mileage of 87km per litre and is priced at Rs. 1,14,900.

Rocking the nation

Sprite Band Challenge—Freedom to Rock, a talent hunt pre-auditions are telecast every Sunday on Kantipur Television from the Russian Cultural Centre. Forty bands will be selected for the auditions which will also be held at the Russian Cultural Center.

Largest mobile showroom

Virgin Mobiles has opened a large mobile showroom in Teenmark Complex, Pashupatinath Road. The new showroom will facilitate customers to various brands of cell phones in one place. The company will sell mobile sets with warranty and is expected to provide services even after the purchase.

NEW PRODUCTS

SAMSUNG: IBS Tele Trade has introduced two Samsung Windows mobile smartphones: the SGH-i780 and U 900. The SGH-i780 is Windows Mobile 6 Professional and features a two megapixel camera and a secondary VGA video call camera, touch screen, 400 MHz CPU, tri-band GSM, WiFi, Bluetooth, an A-GPS receiver, and 256/128 ROM and RAM. The U 900 is an ultra slim phone with minimal design and a real metal body. It has innovative DaCP technology and a five megapixel AF with Power LED Flash, a two megapixel camera and a secondary VGA video call camera. FM radio, mp3, 80 MB (User Memory) with microSD (up to 8GB).

RIO: Rio has introduced a new combination of apple and cherry in its fruit drink. Rio is currently available in a range of flavours such as mango, pineapple, lychee and mixed fruit.

Pressuring the press

It’s not just about democracy

Addressing a public rally in the heart of Kathmandu last week, Maoist Party Chairman Prachanda Kamal Dahal declared, “We will no longer tolerate criticism as we have been elected by the people. I am a candidate against Kantipur Publications he added. They continuously criticised us before the CA elections, but now we have become the largest party.”

Applause greeted Dahal as he advised journalists from other newspapers to think twice before writing anything against the Maoists.

The following day, the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) responded. These remarks from the chairman of the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist, the largest political party in the CA, have raised serious doubts over the Maoists’ commitment to free press. It asked Dahal to make public his party’s policy towards the independent press, as if what he said earlier was valid.

What puzzled me about this exchange was not why Dahal said what he did. Perhaps he was playing to the gallery. Perhaps he remains drunk on his party’s victory. Perhaps he was testing the limit of what he could say in public. Whatever the case may be, since Dahal’s party is on record for murdering and harassing journalists, I found his speech irresponsibly frightening. The FNJ’s response was, as usual, tepid and mechanical. What I found puzzling was why these young people, in their teens and early 20s it the very generation that has seen, experienced and benefited from the free Nepali press since 1990, welcomed Dahal’s remarks with such zeal. It is tempting to dismiss them as brainwashed Maoist cadres. But could it be that those who champion the FNJ and other donor-funded media entities are so used to reacting to the Maoists over the same issues, that they forgot how a job they described as doing to remind the public why press freedom matters in the first place?

Instead of addressing the Maoist leadership, the FNJ should question why these young people, in their teens and early 20s—the very generation which translates into fewer jobs for Nepalis in Nepal—welcomed Dahal’s remarks with rapturous applause.

First, freedom of press makes it easier for newspapers to be accountable to the public. Putting the usual high-minded language about democracy aside, let us not forget that the Nepali mainstream media-scene is commercially competitive, and the currency that endures, for reputation and profits, is the verifiable truth that can be reported first. Just as open competition leads to higher quality and better outcomes in other spheres of business, it also compels Nepali newspapers to keep their standards high.

Let’s hope that next time Dahal makes threats against the press, the FNJ will have the wisdom to find out ways to influence the thinking of his rapturous audience.
I am writing to you, Mr Pushpa Kamal Dahal, since you specifically threatened Kantipur at your public meeting in Tundikhel the other day. You were quoted as saying: ‘I have told the editor of Kantipur that if he keeps on criticising us he will have to face the consequences because the people have now made us victorious.’

Do you mean to say, Mr Dahal, that the media should only criticise the ‘losers’ in elections and you should be above censure? Or that whoever makes the government will have immunity from criticism. Such journalism exists only in people’s republics. In democracies, the media is a watchdog especially vis-à-vis the state and the government.

In previous elections, the NC and UML, have won with much larger numbers of popular votes than the Maoists have this time. The NC, in fact, won a majority twice. But they never said, we have won so stop criticising us. And neither did we stop exposing their wrongs. What kind political culture are you trying to construct, Mr Dahal?

Kantipur had a headline after the elections: ‘Maoist wave’. It wrote that the Maoists should be allowed to form a government. That wasn’t written to flatter you, yet your were happy with the paper that day. We were interpreting the political reality. During the king’s rule we printed your interview. We didn’t print it because you had forced us to print it, and we didn’t desist from printing it out of fear of the king. We fought against the king and the army despite threats.

Am I allowed to express my opinions or not? Am I allowed to speak or not? Why should a journalist be publicly threatened for his coverage by the Maoists? At Tundikhel you asked us not to question your commitment to ‘democratic competition’ and then in complete contradiction you threatened to impose a ‘people’s republic’ if things didn’t go the way you wanted.

Tulsi Girij Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal’s recent statement against the free press has dashed all hopes. At the Republic Day celebrations in Khula Manch, Dahal threatened Kantipur Publications that if they keep criticising the Maoist party there will be consequences.

The Nepali press has taken this statement as a threat and a direct challenge. If there were differences between the party and the publication, they could have dealt with the situation amicably. There could have been dialogue. People are also disappointed by the fact that a party they overwhelmingly supported would threaten the press so publicly. The Maoists should have used this time to build trust. Instead they have given the press community more reason to suspect their intentions.

This is not to say that the press is always right. Sometimes mistakes are made. But it is safe to say that no publication is on a witch-hunt against any political party. It is the right of the people to be informed, and that is not possible in a country where there is no press freedom. And to use the press against a particular party or individual, and for self-interest is unproductive and foolish.

Party leaders have to be careful about the tone and words they choose to use while speaking publicly. If the leader uses a threatening tone, party workers may take it as party policy and reflect that in their actions. The Federation of Nepali Journalists, Reporters Club and Press Chautari Nepal have condemned this recent statement and have requested that the Maoists respect press freedom, stop giving mixed signals and make clear their policy towards the Nepali media.

In a democratic republic it is the responsibility of political parties to ensure that the peoples’ right to be informed is protected. Meanwhile in another public function, Maoist ideologue Baburam Bhattarai has said that Dahal wasn’t threatening anyone. He insisted that unlike in the past, the press would enjoy maximum freedom under the Maoists. If only the Maoists could translate their proclamations into action, Bhattarais assurances would gain more weight.

With Nepal now becoming a republic, we in the media thought there would be more press freedom in the country. However, Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahalís recent statement against the free press has dashed all hopes. At the Republic Day celebrations in Khula Manch, Dahal threatened Kantipur Publications that if they keep criticising the Maoist party there will be consequences.

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Jayapuri Gharti Magar in Naya Patrika, 4 June

Women are often treated as second class citizens in Nepal, but they now hold 191 seats in the constituent assembly. In the old regime women MPs constituted barely five percent, but the women’s movement, active for over 50 years, gained lot of ground in the last few years, especially in the Maoist movement.

Feudal and patriarchal Nepali society did not take kindly to women fighting to change the nation. Over recent years women activists, campaigners and soldiers faced criticism from society, and were jailed, disappeared and tortured.

Still, they refused to give up because they were fighting for equality of class, ethnicity, region and gender. The movement, initially limited to a few districts, spread to all 75. It brought all women together and made them aware of their situation. The fight was not for a few privileged women, but for rural women who had been oppressed for years.

Full women’s rights have still not been achieved yet. It is time to evaluate the past and assess the present position of the movement in order to move ahead. Some leaders still have an old-fashioned attitude towards women. They appear to support them, but then doubt their capability in times of crisis.

Women proved their capability during the interim government, and played a vital role in bringing about a republic. Some people try to belittle their role, but these claims are based on personal agendas and prejudices.

Women’s presence in the assembly is historic. We can not underestimate their capability, as they have already contributed much to the democratic movement. Women are not lacking in competence or unaware of the issues to be raised in the assembly. At present, their role is to write a new constitution, implement the republic and guarantee women’s rights. We must move ahead with the belief that men and women representatives have the same roles in nation-building.
The Euro 2008 draw has been made and the top 16 teams are in Austria and Switzerland to kick off the tournament.

**Favourites**

It is no secret as to who will be the favourites going into the tournament. Greece, topped a tricky qualifying group containing France, a resurgent Serbia and Portugal, which means the tournament will lose some stopping.

Similarly France, beaten World Cup finalists will be out for revenge with an impressive squad. However both teams have been drawn in with Holland and Romania, which means the tournament will lose some stopping.

Elsewhere, history suggests it is foolish to discount Germany, who are to play close to home. Another team to watch is the Czech Republic, who actually finished ahead of Germany, and with only one loss to their name.

**Dark horses**

It is fair to say that Greece’s victory in 2004 was quite possibly the biggest shock in European Championship history. However, although they qualified for the tournament, it would be a surprise if they are to retain their title this year.

Sweden possesses a decent side and enough quality players to suggest they may make it through to the quarter finals. Whether they will be able to progress any further, however, remains to be seen.

Romania had an excellent qualifying campaign yet being drawn with an otherwise strong side means they will have done fantastically well just to reach the quarter finals. Whether they can progress any further, remains to be seen.

Yet perhaps the real dark horses of the competition are Poland. They were the first to qualify top of their group and means they might just be worth a punt.
Tournament. World Champions Italy Scotland and Ukraine and will certainly revenge against the Italians and boast the dreaded ‘Group of Death’, along with at least one quality side early on, especially with the tournament being Republic who topped their qualifying loss along the way.

The biggest shock the European with ease, it will be an even bigger stars in Ibrahimovic and Ljungberg to for they have enough strength in depth drawn with Italy, France and Holland quarter finals; in essence, a rotten draw hand. Although this is their first time in and surprisingly, ahead of Portugal.
Still hand to mouth

Farmers see little benefit from food price rises

KISHOR RIMAL in ROLPA

The scenic little town of Thabang is where the Maoist insurgency began in 1996, and its inhabitants are proud of their role in spearheading the movement which eventually led to the declaration of a federal republic in Nepal last week.

The youth of Thabang are as crowd-puller for tourists and thus a market their village as a tourist destination. The first Jaljala Festival was celebrated this year 20-22 May. Aneta Roka hopes that the festival can become a crowd-puller for tourists and thus create more job opportunities for local youth, many of whom are still unemployed or underemployed. Maoist leader Santosh Budha Magar credits village youth with thinking up the festival and helping organise it.

The youth of Thabang are as relieved as anyone that the war is over. Now they hope for political stability and an environment in which they can earn a living for themselves and build a future for their children. We suffered so much in the war. I hope our children will never have to experience that," says Tilak BK.

Facilities and opportunities in the village are slowly increasing. There is now a higher secondary school in the village so children can study up to class 12.

But after education people also need jobs. Many end up going to the Gulf to work. Those who remain are hoping for some investment from the government or the NGOs.

The Maoists state that they are amenable to working with donor agencies, but they are adamant that all programs should be community-based.

Thabang is typical of much of rural Nepal, the local population is hindered by lack of resources. Villagers like Thabang now look to the new government for help so they can get a new start in life.
Stopping the haemorrhage

The brain drain affects every aspect of Nepal’s development

Over half the students in every class in the Deusa Secondary School, Solu Khumbu, failed their exams this year. Over 300 children will be retaking the year again. Many of them will drop out to work in their parents’ fields or to work as porters in the trekking season.

This school, a day’s walk from the district headquarters at Salleri, is not unusual. Government schools over most of the country are overcrowded classes, crumbling structures and a lack of teaching materials. Is it surprising that many teachers lose hope? Similar problems beset many healthposts. In order to encourage people to take and stay in these jobs, the government needs to address the neglect and hopelessness which are so often found in state services.

If people don’t respect and feel respected in their jobs, they will never want to stay in them, and the villages of Nepal will remain without services as they are now.

Marianne Heredge and her friends are helping to sponsor a number of teachers at remote government schools and are looking for a nurse to reopen the healthpost at Deusa. If anyone is interested to help, she can be contacted at m_heredge@yahoo.co.uk.

If aspiring emigrants knew about all of this, they might be less eager to seek employment abroad. But, as we all know, myths of streets paved with golden persist, and so rather than trying to dissuade them from leaving with scare stories, Nepal will eventually have to offer more incentives for these people to stay.

It is easy to sermonise and tell qualified professionals that they should feel duty-bound to stay and work in their own communities, but at the end of the day it doesn’t look like this will stop the brain drain, which now runs in Nepal like a haemorrhage.

The fact is there is little incentive for professionals to work in the villages. Few people are prepared to sacrifice their own comfort and future for humanitarian ideals, that often look unachievable in the context of widespread government neglect and institutions which no one respects, or expects to function properly.

Many professional people believe that their chances will be better in Kathmandu or abroad. This is not always the case, though. Even Kathmandu only has a finite number of qualified jobs, as do the saturated work markets of North America and Europe. Many immigrants who are qualified as teachers, engineers or doctors in their own countries end up serving fast food or stacking supermarket shelves. And anyhow, nurses and lecturers in the UK are barely able to make ends meet from their own salaries.

It is easy to offer a solution to this problem which will actually work. There is no panacea which can bring decent services to rural areas in an instant. But maybe a change in the mentality of development-makers and state institutions would help. At present, progress seems to be measured in concrete terms—miles of roads laid, number of buildings constructed. Of course these things are important, but having competent people who are willing to work in them is too.

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It is not easy to offer a solution to this problem which will actually work. There is no panacea which can bring decent services to rural areas in an instant. But maybe a change in the mentality of development-makers and state institutions would help. At present, progress seems to be measured in concrete terms—miles of roads laid, number of buildings constructed. Of course these things are important, but having competent people who are willing to work in them is too.

Most government schools have overcrowded classes, crumbling structures and a lack of teaching materials. Is it surprising that many teachers lose hope? Similar problems beset many healthposts. In order to encourage people to take and stay in these jobs, the government needs to address the neglect and hopelessness which are so often found in state services.

If people don’t respect and feel respected in their jobs, they will never want to stay in them, and the villages of Nepal will remain without services as they are now.

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ight media control of the unrest in Tibet has been followed by what, to some, looks like far more open coverage of the devastating earthquake in Sichuan province. Is this a change in China’s media strategy, or just a short term change in tactics?

This question stands out in view of Chinese public opinion in the latter phase of the Tibet crisis. Much to the consternation of the Western media, Chinese people worldwide lashed out against its allegedly biased coverage of the Tibetan riots.

Western reporting, once commended for its veracity, now seems discredited across China, although sympathetic coverage of the loss of life in Sichuan may have redeemed the Western media somewhat. Even Chinese liberals admit that Western journalists blundered badly in Tibet, using cropped images and false captions as evidence of China’s heavy-handed rule.

But much of the Chinese wrath is directed at biased reports, not at Western media in general. And when one looks more closely at how the Chinese responded, both to the unrest in Tibet and the Sichuan earthquake, one sees tangible signs that the Chinese are embracing a greater degree of free speech.

Despite a news blackout during the riots in Lhasa, for example, Chinese internet users managed to dodge the country’s censorship. Much as they loathed domestic publications for blindly following the guidelines of Xinhua, China’s state news agency, they were similarly contemptuous of Western media that mishandled the story. As a result, those Chinese who use the internet as a source for news awakened to the fact that no account—Chinese or Western—is flawless. Such scepticism, which is a fundamental attribute of the democratic mind, may have played a role in pushing the government toward more openness in Sichuan.

Unlike in the past, when Chinese internet users passively received information, years of exposure to concepts such as human rights and democracy have emboldened them to challenge entrenched yet dubious views, even if it means iconoclasm. Chinese audiences are as fed up with the glowing encomiums broadcast by CCTV as they are with the simplistic, context-free reporting of Western media.

After China’s government became aware that independent grassroots movements could convince ordinary Chinese where government propaganda had failed, it lifted its initial ban on reporting on Tibet. ‘Net nannies’—as China’s Internet censors are often dubbed—blocked sensitive articles less frequently. China’s government has apparently begun to appreciate the limitations of cover-ups and stonewalling, and perhaps also the merits of allowing some room for free speech.

This thirst for unbiased information highlights the dramatic change that the internet has brought to China’s political landscape. Nowadays, the government no longer monopolises information and the right to process it. Insightful bloggers attract considerably more clicks than do official mouthpieces. A ‘virtual civil society’ is in the making.

The more open media in Sichuan may be mere posturing to appease critics after the Tibet upheaval and the scuffle over the Olympic torch. The government’s willingness to address squarely questions about shoddy infrastructure will be a key test of the genuineness of its supposed new found tolerance of free speech.

Although free speech is no panacea for China’s woes, only when it is established will the country’s progress be sustainable. Despite the watchful eyes of Beijing, the internet is sowing the seeds of free speech in China. That may be the most important lesson of the crises in Tibet and Sichuan.
As an Englishman who is rarely averse to a dram whatever the weather, Khaire Bhai has been pleased and fascinated by the quality and variety of traditional alcohols in Nepal. Nepali alcoholic beverages are an acquired taste, but once I had acquired it and especially once others knew I had acquired it, in the village it could be hard to get through the afternoon sober.

A few weeks ago I promised to devote a future column to Nepali alcohol (‘Speaking in tongues’, #397). Here it is.

Tongba and raksi are mainstays of the winter. Many a cold night my body has gone to sleep wrapped in a warm glow thanks to these natural heaters, and I am with that section of the Nepali population which believes that raksi is good for an upset stomach, though I don't know if the belief has any basis in medical fact.

But the best taste and widest variety are found in jad, a beer which can be brewed from seemingly almost any grain. The most popular varieties include:

1. Kodo ko jad, the king of jads. Most popular in eastern Nepal, the millet brew is sharp and refreshing, especially if it has been fermented long enough to be sour rather than sweet, and is of a thin consistency.

2. Chamal ko jad, the favourite in Kathmandu and the Valley rice jad is usually sweeter and often thicker than millet. I like this variety but find it is less tasty than millet and can be deceptively and dangerous strong, and should be treated with care on social occasion.

3. Makai ko jad—I have only been served maize brew a couple of times in the central hills. To be honest it was not my favourite. The texture was gritty and taste inferior to other varieties. Maybe I just got a bad batch.

4. Gahun ko jad—served in higher-up villages, wheat jad is no-nonsense and thick, filling the stomach almost like eating a meal. This is the most giggly of jads, as the power is slowly released from the full stomach.

5. Kodo ra chamal ko mix—apparently the best proportions are 80-90 percent millet and 10-20 percent rice. If the mix and fermentation time are right, this can be even better than pure millet.

Jad can also be made from various other grains and roots, though this connoisseur hasn't had the pleasure of trying them out. But whereas Khaire Bhai has enjoyed all the drinks and is grateful for the hospitality and brewing skill of so many hosts, he is aware that the spectre of alcoholism, which increasingly haunts the UK public consciousness, also hangs over Nepal.

Although here it tends to be older rather than younger people who consume more alcohol and ‘binge drink’, as the British media would have it, this still represents a danger and a problem. The realisation only dawned on me slowly that people who start drinking tongba first thing in the morning every day are alcoholics. Having drunk parents or grandparents strikes me as even more dangerous to society as a whole than having drunk children, especially in a country where age is accorded sometimes unquestioning obedience and deference.

Of course by no means everyone is an alcoholic. Indeed alcohol is despised by another section of the population, an attitude which seems almost as unhealthy. Nepali society has a kind of schizophrenia about alcohol. Some young people in Nepal are either put under pressure to drink by older relatives, and some forbidden it on pain of disinheritance by teetotal parents. Many drink secretly whereas others, seeing the effect of alcoholism on some of their elders, have forsworn it themselves.

In a country where alcohol is very widely available and traditionally consumed, puritanical vilification of drinking is not a solution to alcoholism, as it just hardens resistance to what some people see as an attempt to suppress their culture.

Maybe it would be more healthy for everyone to accept that using alcohol in moderation is enjoyable, and try to consider the reasons, individual and social, why certain people become addicted to it. Helping alcoholics with their addiction will most likely do more good than condemning them.

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lex Chamling used to dread going to confession at his church. As a gay Roman Catholic, he felt ashamed of his sexuality, which his church told him was a sin. But after meeting other gay people this year, he says he now feels more confident about himself and has given up going to confession.

“As long as it doesn’t affect others in a negative way, I don’t believe that loving someone of the same sex can be a sin,” he says. “My priest has told me that although not religiously correct, I have every right to love whoever I want.” The 27-year-old remains a Catholic believer and still attends weekly Mass.

Most LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) people in Nepal do not face the same inner religious conflict as Alex. Hinduism contains no explicit religious teachings against homosexuality, and families in the Tarai sometimes invite cross-dressers to bless their newborn children.

But few people want a gay person in their own family. Most battles that LGBTI people have to fight in Nepal are against exclusion from society and their own families.

“If we tell the truth about our sexuality in a job interview, we lose the job,” says transgender Kusum Lama, who will take hormone pills for the rest of her life to achieve a feminine figure. The sprightly 21-year-old became a sex worker in discos and bars after leaving her family, but later found support from the Blue Diamond Society (BDS), an NGO that helps the LGBTI community through education, healthcare and advocacy.

Lama, now the national secretary for the Federation of Sexuality and Gender Minorities Nepal (FSGMN), says: “People think that transgender people only know how to put on lipstick, dance around, clap their hands and be prostitutes. They don’t know how career-driven and clever we can be.”

Leaders of the LGBTI community say there may be 900,000 lesbian and gay people in Nepal, most of whom continue to hide their sexuality from society. Life for these people, especially transgender, is especially hard in rural areas, where village society expects them to marry someone of the opposite sex. Many are attacked by the anonymity and relative freedom they can find in larger towns and cities.

Lesbian couple Suman Tamang, 26, and Anusha Tamang, 21, had to leave their village in Jhapa after revealing to their families that they were in a relationship. Now they are struggling to make a living in Kathmandu, and Suman is learning to drive to become a taxi driver. “We can’t go back to our village,” says Suman. “Only in Kathmandu can we live our married life in peace.”

When LGBTI people in Nepal speak of marriage, it has no legal status. There is no paperwork involved, as the state still doesn’t recognise same-sex marriages. But the situation is slowly changing. On 21 December 2011, the Supreme Court of Nepal declared that all discriminatory laws against LGBTI people must be repealed by the government, and provision must be made for the ‘third gender’ on government documents. Nepal has become the only South Asian country to provide such rights. And as California’s Supreme Court lifts a ban on gay marriage this month, Nepal is making progress on the sidelines, with the BDS and Supreme Court talking of forming a committee to explore the legalisation of same-sex marriages.

Sunil Babu Pant, Nepal’s first openly gay MP and founder of the BDS, is hopeful about the future for LGBTI people in Nepal. “Things are improving,” he says. “There is less violence compared to three years ago due to increased sensitisation.” But there are still more than 50 cases of violence or discrimination against LGBTI people pending in the courts.

Awareness of homosexuality is growing in Nepal. At least LGBTI people do not have to face the religious condemnation they do in Catholic countries, but there is still a long way to go before they are accepted as ‘normal’. 

**WONG SHU YUN**

**BECAUSE I’M WORTH IT:**

Kusum Lama works at the Blue Diamond Society, and dreams of becoming a fashion designer.
Prakash Karat is among the most powerful people in India today. With the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government dependent on the support of the left, the general secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) holds a veto on critical issues and has blocked the Indo-US nuclear deal. With Sitaram Yechury, Karat used the clout of CPM to influence India’s Nepal policy and the tilt towards republic. Sitting in his New Delhi party office, Karat spoke to Nepali Times’ Prashant Jha last week. Excerpts:

How do you see the recent election results in Nepal?

The political process and elections have significance not only for Nepal, but also South Asia. This is the first break in the chain of imperialism that has engulfed our entire region. American influence expresses itself through neo-liberal economic policies and military partnerships. Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, all are getting locked into US strategic designs. The last two years in Nepal and now the election results have provided a break with what the US has been up to. The process in Nepal and our opposition to the nuclear deal, all show it is possible to fight and try to de-link from US imperialism.

You claim that India is getting locked into US designs, and is not pursuing an independent policy. How do you explain the fact there is a visible divergence in the Indian and American approach on Nepal?

India’s strategic autonomy has got curbed, especially with the nuclear deal. Our collaboration with Israel and stand against Iran are examples. The Indian establishment, left to itself, would have taken the well beaten path on Nepal as well. Do you remember the meeting between Manmohan Singh and the King in Jakarta and India promising to resume military aid to Nepal? That was the line being pushed by our army and defence sectors. It was on the left who put our foot down and objected. There was constant pressure from us on the government to work with the parties and Maoists. The left’s pivotal role on Nepal and its support for the peace process must be taken into account.

Sitaram Yechury constantly makes the point about how the Indian Naxalites must learn from the Nepali Maoists. How do you view Naxalism in India?

Right now in West Bengal we face constant Maoist attacks. From 2006, 32 of our important cadre have been killed by these self-styled Maoists. Whose cause do they serve by adopting these tactics and killing our people? They do no work with the masses. This type of anarchosectarian politics cannot be called left politics. In Nepal, the Maoists made a significant transition. They launched an armed struggle, developed a mass base, and realised that this mass base must be utilised to move to the next stage.

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In Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull, Professor Jones (Harrison Ford) goes after the mysterious crystal skull from South American mythology. But Jones isn't the only one after the skull. The Soviet Union has an interest in getting the skull in order to exploit its mystical powers in their fight for world domination.

The story revolves around how Jones races the Soviets led by the cold, villainous, no-nonsense Irina Spalko (Cate Blanchett)-to a lost city called Akakor in the Peruvian forest, in pursuit of the mystical crystal skull.

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RAGE: At the CAs first session on 28 May, UML MP Kamala Sharma takes off her shoe to beat NC leader Purna Bahadur Khadka, who she holds responsible for the death of her husband Rishi Prasad Sharma during the election campaign. Khadka’s bodyguards shot him.

ON TOP OF THE WORLD: Himalmedia reporter Shailee Basnet on the summit of Mount Everest on 25 May. She climbed the mountain with the First Inclusive Women’s Sagarmatha Expedition.

ROCKY ROAD: A competitor in the 6th Tenzing Hillary Everest Marathon scrambles over scree near the Everest Base Camp on 29 May.

SPLASH: College students play waterpolo at the 7Up College Swimming Fungama, organised by Wave Magazine on 30 May.
fter Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath Chatterjee’s message of felicitation was read out to the first session of the Constituent Assembly, some wisecracks at the BICC were overheard muttering that Nepal now wasn’t just a Ganatantra, but a Jana-Gana-Mana-Tantra. Which is probably what Comrade Ferocious also meant when he warned that he would turn Nepal into a “people’s republic” if the NC didn’t stop creating obstacles.

But the Ass thinks maybe we shouldn’t give the Indians too much flak for reading out Speaker Somnath’s message to the august CA last week. Turns out it was the CA Secretariat’s fault for putting messages from friendly countries in the agenda for the session, but they never followed up and none of the foreign missions in Kathmandu (except Lainchour) bothered. The conscientious Indians felt it would be embarrassing if they were missing so CT Somnath Chatterjee to dash off a congratulatory missive. There being only one country which sent a message, that was the only one that was read out. Seems the secretariat didn’t want to tick off the Indians.

A poll in the Indian Express this week shows that 70 percent of Indians think getting rid of the Nepal monarchy was a bad idea and wasn’t in India’s national interest. It seems there are now more monarchists in the Republic of India than in FDRN.

The last media interview that the ex-kingji gave was to the Japanese newspaper, Yomuiri Shimbun in January. This week, the Yomuiri has carried an interview with Chairman Chhabilal in which he tells the Japanese reporter that Gyanendra has a bright future ahead of him “as a businessman, or even a politician”. Now, it can’t just be a coincidence that the very next day ex-kingji assures his family gathering at Narayanhiti that he may restart his business career, or launch a new political party. Seems the two have been exchanging notes. If Awesome thinks ex-kingji can be a politician, then why not just nominate Gyanendra the first president of republican Nepal and break the current political deadlock?

Even after the housing crisis for the ex-royals has been solved by shunting Gyan off to Nagarjun, Paras to Nirmal Nibas and allowing the ex-queen mother to stay on at Mahendra Manjil, the nation was immediately confronted with another crisis, viz: the issue of where the new presidential palace should be located. A delegation of government secretaries has been doing the rounds visiting potential sites like the Ita Tile Karkhana in Harisiddhi, the Himal Cement Factory in Chobar and even the Chhala Jutta Karkhana in Bansbari. But they have zeroed in on Shital Nibas as the official residence for the president, to be called The Yellow House. The Ass agrees, it is probably the most suitable because of its ample parking, location opposite Bhairabnath and it has a working fountain.

But the incumbent MoFA bureaucrats are reportedly loath to let go of their cosy dens and have said they will move only if they are relocated into Naryanhiti.

The Ass has an idea, why not house the new prez at the Trolley Bus Terminal which has already been turned into a dorm for YCLs and the young commies residing there can be converted into the new Young Presidential Palace Guards and kick off the integration of the two armies. True, the Trolley Bus Building will need some sprucing up, but it is centrally located and if the president is senile and in poor health, the new Chinese-built Civil Service Hospital is right across the road. Better, if Gyanendra can be named president then Nagarjun can also be the presidential palace. The residents of Balaju were astounded to look up and see the Nagarjun forest all lit up with neon on the day Nepal was declared a republic. Was that a sign?

Memo to Mahara Sir who just got back from a junket to China: Chinese trying to reduce the official height of Mt Everest by three metres to 8845m. You should not, repeat not, agree to this and threaten retaliation if they do. We will not give away even a centimeter of our territory.