Hurry up

When the results of Friday’s by-elections in six constituencies come out next week, they will offer an indication of the support base for the Maoists, who themselves admit that after eight months in power they haven’t been able to show tangible progress.

The current session of parliament has been disrupted for two weeks in a row after the UML, partners with the Maoists in the coalition, demanded action over the killing of its supporter in Butwal last month. Time is also running out on integrating the armies before UNMIN’s mandate expires in June, and in writing the new constitution by April next year.

The run-up to the by-elections have been marred by violence with even a gun battle breaking out between supporters of the Maoists and a break-away faction led by Matrika Yadav in Biratnagar on Thursday.

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal appears to be increasingly frustrated with the delays and has been trying to use his deft negotiating skills to try to convince the leaders of the UML and NC to smooth things along. Analysts say that a lot is riding on the outcome of the by-elections, and the results will determine whether or not the coalition remains intact, and if the NC will join the government.

The prime minister has been barely able to hide his frustration. A day after returning from a week-long visit to Norway and Finland during which he assured leaders there that he was serious about protecting democracy and the free press, he lashed out publicly using abusive language at his colleagues in the NC and UML. The next day, he turned his aim at the media, accusing publishers of being “smugglers” and under the control of “feudalists, capitalists and reactionary forces”.

The Nepal Media Society, Television Broadcasters Nepal, Community Radio Broadcasters Association, Broadcasting Association of Nepal and Kathmandu Valley Broadcasting Association deplored the prime minister’s remarks, calling them “uncalled for and irresponsible”.

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal at the Khula Manch on Sunday before delivering a speech in which he lashed out at the political parties for slowing him down.
Banks in Nepal seem to be in a bit of a crisis. According to the head of Nepal Rastra Bank, Nepali commercial banks hold close to Rs 670 billion in deposits, but for banks to be profitable they have to put this deposit to work. Given the poor real estate climate and warping property prices, it is a fair guess—this cash is feeding the real estate bubble. Such a bubble-driven by excess credit fueled liquidity is exactly what brought many US banks to their knees, and there is a good lesson there for us.

As property prices went up, banks in the US found increasing their real estate loan portfolio an easy way to boost earnings. They not only kept loans in their own balance sheet, but packaged them into securitized products to the benefit of investors worldwide. Further increasing the demand for mortgage loans. Borrowers were approved for loans they were not capable of paying and the house prices jumped on the bandwagon assuming that real estate prices could only go up.

What initially started as a problem in the subprime loans or loans made to risky borrowers, has spread to prime loans as decreasing real estate prices and increasing unemployment rate are putting even credit worthy borrowers at risk. As a result, banks are now stuck with hundreds of billions of dollars in real estate loans, some of which are practically worthless, and are thus forced to look billions of dollars in losses. The moral hazard is threatening the solvency of some US banks. The FDIC has seized more than 21 failing banks so far in 2009.

We are inside a real estate bubble in Nepal, and this bubble could burst. Among other things, a fall in asset prices, and higher interest rates, would have an impact on the remittance flow into Nepal which will reduce the liquidity in the banking sector and the money chasing real estate assets.

When the bubble bursts, not only will many Nepalis feel the pinch from a fall in asset prices, but the property prices, but their deposits in banks could also be at risk. If banks that are overexposed to real estate lending face defaults, threatening their ability to meet obligations to depositors. The margin of error for Nepali financial institutions, as well as for public, is very small.

Unlike most other countries, there is no established deposit insurance program in Nepal and it is questionable that Nepal Rastra Bank has the ability to manage a run on the banks. Outstanding loans of commercial banks to the real estate sector grew at a staggering rate to Rs 17.9 billion in February from Rs 6.6 billion just a year earlier. The questions to ask the banks are: what percentage of outstanding loans is real estate related, including both direct and indirect loans where real estate asset is kept as collateral? How will the real estate price reallocation impact the performance and recovery of these loans? Have the banks done a stress test for the worst case scenario and are they adequately capitalized if that scenario materializes?

The government and Nepal Rastra Bank should also look into the possibility of creating a deposit insurance program up to a certain threshold. Such a program can be funded from the premium paid by the deposit-taking institutions and the premium should be based on the risk assessment of the participating institution.

It is not too late for Nepal, but it is time to ask tough questions to the bankers regarding the deposit insurance program and focus on risk management so that when this real estate bubble ultimately bursts, it doesn’t take the banking sector down with it. •

Raju Sitaula is a banking professional based in New York.


correction: due to an editing error, the village of Palkhok where the natural disaster took place (We are all Nepal first, #445) was given as being located in Kabhre. The village is actually in Sindupalchok.
Circumstances sometimes propel weak personalities to the top. Nagendra Prasad Rijal became prime minister of the country twice during Panchayat regime, but few outside the Marwari community of Biratnagar remember him. Other than his role as a reluctant midwife of multiparty democracy in 1990, it’s difficult to pinpoint contributions of Lokendra Bahadur Chand even though he served four stints at Singha Darbar. Rijal and Chand were products of Panchayat, but Sher Bahadur Deuba became prime minister of the country after democracy. During his first term, he had to resort to pork barrel politics to save his government from collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions. When Deuba went into Baluwatar as the leader of a majority government in 2001, within a few months of the Narayanhiti massacre, vastu experts, feng sui consultants, siddha sanyasis, itinerant yogis, indigenous dhamis and renowned tantriks were engaged to placate the stars. Apparently, the heavenly bodies weren’t amused. Deuba became the first premier in modern history to be sacked not once but twice by the king. He served his third term as a loyal henchman of the royal CEO and was put under house arrest even before being served with a dismissal order. But despite his spectacular failures, Deuba isn’t considered the weakest prime minister of the country. The choice for the dubious distinction has to be made between Padma Shamsher (1945-1948) and Ranganath Poudel (1837-1838). Padma’s predicaments were real. The Ranas lost their patrons as the British went home from India, leaving native potentates to their own devices. To his credit, Padma did try to modernise statecraft, but had no courage to implement the constitution he promulgated in the face of opposition from his restive cousins. He chose honourable exit and went into self-exile. Ranganath Poudel was fortunate. He was the guru of Rajendra Bikram Shah and didn’t expect to be a mukhtiyar—the job usually went to Chhetri nobles from Gorkha or to Kathmandu’s military aristocrats. But in the conspiracy-ridden politics of 1830s, he was the only person acceptable to everyone in the all-powerful coterie of the Darbar. He put the condition that he would accept mukhtiyarit only if Bhimsen Thapa was released. Rajendra complied but harboured the suspicion that Ranganath Guru was probably more loyal to the British Resident Brian Hodgson than to the king. The shifty monarch once said Rangnath was a man of first-rate talent but second-rate honesty. So the first Bahumni premier of the country couldn’t do much and had to bow out in disgrace. Rangnath was probably a victim and not a failure, but he is considered to be the weakest prime minister in Nepal’s history. It seems now he has some competition. Just as all competing groups of the palace had accepted Rangnath’s nomination 170 years ago, Pushpa Kamal Dahal became prime minister with the support of 25 political parties in the constituent assembly. The NC could have accepted a supportive role in the government. Deuba offered it in a proper manner, but the NC was so demoralised it opted out. Buoyed by the prospect of forming a unity, the Maoist Supremo forgot that UML would not carry him on its shoulders for nothing. As cost-benefit analysts, the schemers of Baliku palace are some of the best in the business. It’s understandable that the Maoists want a presidential system of government. Its party chief can then reign, rule, and roll unchallenged all over the domain. But consensus is the hallmark of a parliamentary system. When the prime minister is merely first among equals, he has to be a leader that commands the respect of all his colleagues and competitors alike. An ideal leader is the one who rules with the consent of the ruled, guides by being at the head of the group, and inspires all others by setting an example. Dahal needs to ask himself: “Am I just a party supremo, or am I the prime minister of this country?” The soul of Ranganath Guru can now rest in peace. In the lineup of weak prime ministers, the most recent entrant is also perhaps the least efficient, his legendary craftiness notwithstanding.

PKD should behave like the prime minister of the country, not just a party supremo. Leadership deficit

PKD should behave like the prime minister of the country, not just a party supremo.
Closed minds

The CA’s Committee to Protect and Preserve the National Interest has suggested that a passport regime be introduced at the Nepal-India border. Committee Chair Amik Sherchan has said this is necessary to “protect waning Nepali nationalism and to treat both China and India equally.” Sherchan claimed that the “majority of the Nepali people share this view.”

The demand for passport control on the India border comes from three quarters: the Kathmandu (yes, it is confined to the capital) political spectrum. The first is the nationalists who borrow the Westphalian notion of absolutely sovereign nation states. They argue that one reason the Nepali state has never been totally independent is because it has not controlled the movement of people across its boundaries. The second is the school of economic protectionists, especially on the left, who believe that Nepal has a “semi-colonial” relationship with India because the open border makes the country a cheap source of labour and raw materials and a recipient of finished goods.

The third includes hill chauvinists who oppose the open border. They see the Madhes movement as solely a result of the open border and India’s covert attempt to destabilise Nepal. Proponents argue that closing the border will defuse the Madhes unrest and solve the most important challenge to the Nepali state. Sherchan, a pahadi Maoist, represents the synthesis of all these three views. The nationalists forget that an absolutely sovereign state is a myth. There is also an element of hypocrisy because it is the same people who have at different points used the open border against the Nepali state (like the Maoists did) or do not care about it because they usually fly across to India (the capital elite).

Introducing passports at the India-Nepal border will hurt us Nepalis more

The left economists forget that the open border, along with disadvantages, also empowers Nepali labour by allowing them to move out in search of opportunities where there is little to offer at home. It helps national capital by giving it an opportunity to piggyback on India’s market economy. And those who blame the border for the Madhes mess refuse to look within at the internal discrimination that gave rise to it in the first place. Kathmandu politicians are also mistaken in thinking that the Indian establishment prefers an open border and that India takes advantage from it. Even if it benefits a few petty border traders, Nepal’s open border is a liability given their concerns about fake currency, narcotica, ISI influence and now the possibility of the Chinese getting right into the Tarai. Unlike what our netas think, they will find it increasingly difficult to find a fairly receptive audience to such a proposal in Delhi’s power corridors.

But while regulating the border and improving administration on both sides is necessary, any attempt to introduce passports or close the border will be deeply unfortunate and politically counter-productive for us Nepalis.

The poorest segments of the population who cross the border to earn their livelihoods will suffer the most. It will deprive the Nepali macroeconomy of a safety valve and prevent our entrepreneurs from making the best of growing opportunities on the other side.

Most importantly, it will devastate the lives of the economically inter-dependent local borderland population on both sides. It will invite a ferocious Madhesi backlash which will see the move as an attempt to kill off their links with their families on the other side. It helps national capital by giving it an opportunity to piggyback on India’s market economy.

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But most of all, it will not work. If fencing on the Indian-Bangladesh border or millions of troops on the India-Pakistan border cannot prevent mobility, there is no way that the governments can control movement across the fields and rivers on the 1,750km India-Nepal border.

Nepali nationalism is not under threat from open borders. It is under threat because politicians are not getting on with their job of writing a constitution. The same plausibility bunch is now coming up with wild schemes to block the normal flow across borders. If they do go ahead, they must be prepared for some nasty consequences.

As a pioneer of borders studies, Willem Van Schendel puts it, “No matter how clearly borders are drawn on national maps, how many custom officials are appointed, or how many watchtowers are built, people will ignore borders when it suits them.”
Banda business

Everybody loves a good hartal

Last Monday morning everyone I spoke with asked the same two questions. One: was it a banda that day or not. And two: who was calling it.

It seems no one really knew, but everyone loves a good nationwide strike and one more day off. Students are happy to have no class and to have exams postponed. It’s a good excuse to go to the office an hour late and leave an hour early, citing the need to walk there and back. And for those who love big bonfires, it is another great chance to burn a vehicle.

In Dharan and other parts of eastern Nepal, the general discussion is about who will organise the next banda. The standard operating procedure is simple: choose a date, outsource activists, do something that will attract media attention and then wait for your turn to organise the next one.

Observers point out that the people who stage the demos, participate in the masal julus, torch vehicles, deflate or burn tyres are all one and the same. On a course titled Nepali Management 101, perhaps this would be a good example of outsourcing.

Why should we complain if all political parties outsource the services of the same people to broker their business deals? Isn’t it good to have the same set of people honing their expertise and offering their services to a variety of clients? Perhaps Nepal could become the world’s greatest source of outsourced protestor talent.

Nepalis have accepted bandas as a way of life when they should be rallying against them. The business of bandas is getting out of hand. Soon entrepreneurs running tanker business will be calling a banda to change laws so they can vandalize vehicles belonging to their competitors and parents will block traffic to protest against their children not being allowed to cheat in examinations or because they want job guarantees for graduates with poor degrees. (Wait, that’s already happening.) Why should business organizations feel it acceptable to threaten shut down rather than debate a policy issue with the government?

This Beed always refers to Kathmandu as a sister city of Kolkata because if someone visits either city and returns without encountering a political showdown in the streets he or she will feel something is missing.
Replicating Dhulikhel

Debendra Bhattarai in Kantipur, 5 April

Last week, the news that the prime minister’s son Prakash Dahal got drunk and passed out at Dhulikhel Resort made the headlines, overshadowing what PM Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Finance Minister Baburam Bhattarai were really doing there. They were visiting Dhulikhel to find out about how that town has become a model for education and health. For three hours, the leaders discussed the exemplary Kathmandu University and Dhulikhel Hospital with the people who run them.

Kathmandu University’s Vice-chancellor Surendra Raj Sharma was there, and says: “We offered suggestions about education and health. One shouldn’t separate private and public. Kathmandu University and Dhulikhel Hospital may be private but they are non-profit public service oriented. The government shouldn’t dismiss private organisations just because they are private. We should work together to move ahead.”

Dhulikhel hospital’s Ram Makaju and Rajendra Koju noted that the leaders hadn’t, until then, grasped the concept of community-based activities. Koju said: “The hospital is neither private nor government run. We are community-run and we work for them.” He pointed out a 13-year-old hospital and a 17-year-old university in Dhulikhel have contributed to nation-building.

When the PM questioned which activities the government should give priority to, Sharma replied telling the prime minister, “It needs to be effective and tailored to the needs of the market.”

The leaders also heard how Dhulikhel hospital has been treating patients at a minimal cost while students at Kathmandu University also pay a lot less than they would at other colleges. Finance Minister Baburam Bhattarai then asked how Dhulikhel’s exemplary community-based education and health system could be replicated. Koju replied that government-run hospitals don’t function well and private ones are expensive. “So, we have to implement the concept of community-managed health and education.”

Sharma said it made him happy and optimistic to see the leaders in Dhulikhel.

Demagoguery and the psychology of fear

Khem Bhandary in Kantipur, 6 April

Following the murder of Youth Force activist Prachanda Thabha in Butwal, the UML threatened to quit the coalition. The thundering response of Finance Minister Baburam Bhattarai was: “If there is an attempt to topple the government, the Maoists will once again resort to a revolt.” Even though he has made such threats before, the meaning and intent of the latest pronouncement point to grave danger.

It would be wrong to term this threat of ‘revolt’ from a top leader of the party in government as based on momentary emotion. Bhattarai is in fact giving us the indication of an extremely well thought-out plan, and there is an intent to blackmail the other political parties as well as the people. It reflects the presence of a totalitarian mindset within the Maoist party.

The Maoists are today using only slightly modified version of the psychological methods of influence and control that they perfected during their armed insurgency. The goal is to progressively extend full control over the state and the society.

While the widely-held impression is that Bhattarai is the moderate and the democrat among the Maoists, he was the first Maoist leader to threaten revolt if there was an attempt to topple the government, and he is the only one who continuously repeats that warning.

The Maoists seem to be utilizing one of the psychological tools of military science, of directing one’s fire at where the opponent is most vulnerable. The public seeks peace before all else, the NC and UML seek to proceed through sustainable, peaceful politics, and so the Maoists use ‘peace’ as a bargaining chip.

In return for long-term peace the people will give them the vote, while the UML and NC will submit to the Maoists requiring in power to prevent violence and anarchy.

The oft-repeated threats of revolt are but one way of reminding the public continuously of its yearning for peace, and to force other political parties to buck. The people are made to believe that it is just a revolt to destroy the peace is a birthright of the Maoists, while it is the job of the other parties to work for peace. The impression being created is that the Maoists have the right and privilege to create anarchy, in case they are made to leave government.

The existing state of impunity is not the residue of the transitional phase we are in, nor is it the result of governmental ineffectiveness. It is a deliberate weapon being used by the Maoists to spread fear.

Attacks on the press, businesses, schools, interference with the civil service, the military, demonstrations against the judiciary, the behaviour towards NGOs, and the vicious response to anyone who criticises are all proof of the planned Maoist exercise to extend command over all the facets of society.

This sort of fear mongering on the part of a party which has already accepted the system of periodic elections is nothing but a corrupt output of wartime hubris. Regardless of what they may know of conflict and social progress, the Maoists say they abandoned the people’s war and embraced multiparty democracy because of geopolitics. They are myopic: they underestimate the people’s rejection of violence as the real reason. The Maoists also seem too quick to ridicule the support among the people for the UML and NC. They have not even been able to understand why they got the votes they did in the elections.

The people wanted not only a republic and a new constitution, they also voted for peace. The Maoists are showing extreme reluctance to accept this reading.

Even though they have had control of state power for a full year, there is no evidence of conflict and social progress. The Maoists seem to be unwilling to understand why the people got the votes they did in the elections. The Maoists are showing extreme reluctance to accept this reading.

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Federalisation is not a panacea

Instead of debating about ethnicity on the basis of demography, majority and minority, it is important that we understand whether the state has created an environment for groups to participate, be represented and provided equal opportunities.

There’s an ongoing debate over whether the country should follow a unitary-centred, decentralised structure, or whether the power should be distributed among federal provinces. However, if we continue to believe that power comes from the central state, it makes no difference whether we adopt a federal republic. The group that believes that power comes from the barrel of a gun is also eyeing to capture state power. They don’t understand that they are just caretakers of state power and that the real power lies with the people. And there is those from the null regime who still see social diversity and its management as an obstacle.

Instead of trying to change the identity groups are born with, it is useful to recognise them and develop them as a part of the state structure. It is indeed scientific to classify the provinces on the basis of language, ethnicity, or region.

Federalism is when sovereignty and power are divided between central and federal units. In a federal state there is autonomy at the regional level while cooperation must exist at the federal level. Federalism supports decentralisation and celebrates and protects the diversity of the country.

According to the 2001 census of the 100 Janajatis in Nepal (which make up 37 per cent of the total population) there are 18 ethnicities that each make up more than one per cent of the total population. 83 per cent of the Janajatis are comprised of the 19 groups while the remaining 15 per cent consists of 82 different castes and ethnicities. 11 ethnicities have majorities in more than 30 VDCs.

In the west and far west there is a dominance of Chettris. Magars are in the mid-west and west, southern Tarai and northern hills. Similarly, Gurungs are dominant in the northern hills and high mountainous regions. Kathmandu is dominated by Newars and Tamangs are in northern hills, southern Tarai, Chure region, Bhusal Gandaki in the west and Dushi Kosi in the east. The region between Dushi Kosi and Arun River is called the Khuwai region and north of that region is dominated by the Limbus. Tharus dominate Kanchanpur to Nawalparasi. Those who speak Maithili are spread between Saptari to Sarlahi. Maithili language is considered the mother tongue of more than three dozen ethnicities but there’s still dispute regarding the name.

Those who speak Bhojpuri are found in Bara, Parsa and Ranahait. Awadhi language populations dominate Kapilasabhu and southern Banka, Rajanahi, Taadighat, Majhi and Garuqi are in the northern Tarai. But there’s a dispute there also on what the common language should be. Sunwari, Morang and Jhapa may be claimed by Tharaihit, Limbikhan, Kanchha, Moregunj and Bist but historically they are in the Limbus zone. It is clear that language and ethnicity are the simplest basis for classification of regions. Autonomy can be arranged for the 82 remaining ethnicities via the federal unit or at the local level. Integration of other ethnicities around the country can be arranged via reservations or non-provincial organisations.

Making a federal unit according to ethnicity doesn’t mean that the other ethnicities are forcefully driven away. For instance, Tharus are the original inhabitants of the Tarai, but many other ethnicities also live there. MP has also been positive towards the Tharu’s proposal.

If any particular ethnic groups are the original inhabitants of the region and have a majority, it is in the spirit of democracy to name the province according to their name. Similarly, if there are certain ethnicities that are on the verge of extinction, it is acceptable to name that province after them.

The demands of Tharaihit, Limbikhan, Tanakpur have been denied by other ethnicities in the areas that respect the Panchayat regime. It is not because the Limbus didn’t struggle enough for their rights that their names were not included but because of the Hindu royalist regime that didn’t consider the grievances of the Limbus to begin with. The Limbus provinces will not tolerate discrimination. However, the Limbus have welcomed other discriminated ethnicities under their umbrella and provide them with social, economic, political and educational reservations.

The struggles between the majority and minority are not about who has the upper hand. It is about dealing with the issues of identity and addressing years of discrimination via constitutional state mechanisms. Assurances and co-option will not work anymore.

Balkrishna Mabuhang is professor at the Central Department of Population at Tribhuvan University.

Federalisation is not a panacea

But it’s historically inaccurate to argue that it causes separatism

NANCY BOROME

Since 1945, ethnic violence has played a major role in half of all wars, turned more than 12 million people into refugees, and caused at least 11 million deaths. Precisely because today’s wars have been between peoples rather than states, civilian casualties have risen dramatically. Fewer than half of the casualties in World War II were civilians; today some three-quarters of all war casualties are civilian.

While most of the violence is caused by states, separatist movements and wars also have a devastating impact on civilians. In the following pages, we examine the role of federalism in causing and ending civil conflict.

Federalism is about ethnic autonomy and ending years of discrimination by the central administration

In the Punjab, a Sikh separatist rebellion dragged on for years as Indira Gandhi refused concessions and tried to triumph through armed force. When a new central government allowed a series of elections, the major Sikh political party came to power, and Sikh separatism was forced “off-stage.”

Hard times should also remember that separatist movements are more often the stepchildren of threats than of concessions. The forced imposition of a single state language boosted separatist movements in Sri Lanka. Often, it is the refusal to federalise, rather than federalism itself that stimulates secession. In Pakistan, it was federal borderers rather than federal institutions that were imposed.

Federalisation is not a panacea and federalism is no guarantee of peace or of anything else. There are undoubtedly situations in which such options should be spared. Yet it is important not to reject federalism for spurious reasons, and it is historically inaccurate to argue that it brings on separatism.

Nancy Borromeo is the professor of politics at Princeton University. This article is excerpted from The Import Of Institutions, which appeared in the Journal of Democracy (Volume 13, Number 2, April 2002).
Sunita Bujhel wakes up before dawn every other day to join the queue up at the public tap in Satdobato. After waiting all day she returns home at around 3.30 PM carrying two jerrycans of water to last her family for the next two days.

The recent rainfall that broke the six month drought has provided no relief, and the decrease in power cuts has only made things worse. As soon as the power comes on in the morning, shops and houses that have electric pumps quickly draw up the water, leaving no water for those waiting at the taps.

“It’s difficult,” sighs Sunita, “even though we try to save as much as we can.”

The desperation is boiling into anger on the streets. Two weeks ago, locals held a strike in Basantapur and women from Bhaktapur had a sit-in in front of the Kathmandu Uptayaka Khanepani Limited office. Fights often erupt at the water queues. Last week, there was a clash in Satdobato at 1AM when a neighbourhood house drew most of the water those in line had been waiting for since the previous day.

Buying water is expensive. One 5,000 litre tanker costs up to Rs 2,000. Families load up on small plastic jars, costing Rs 300 initially, and Rs 60 per refill. An average four-member family usually consumes up to 15 jars a month. The owner of a gas cylinder shop has recently diversified into selling water jars. “People are getting frantic,” says the shopkeeper, “most families use the jars for almost everything: washing dishes, bathing, drinking water.”

Khanepani Limited has increased the number of trucks supplying water, and even injects water into the mains. But this makes little difference. The valley demand is currently 280 million litres per day, but supply is less than 90 million litres.

In Mangal Bajar, though, the community has got together to manage water. In Kumbeswor, local committees regulate water queues and store well water and mains supply in 10,000 litre tanks. At the public spout in Smadikul there are rules on water use. At Patan Durbar Square, committee members raise money to maintain the sunken spouts.

Another solution is rainwater harvesting, but most rain storage has gone dry because of the prolonged drought. A system to store rainwater for four months after the monsoon costs Rs 30,000 for a 7,500 litre system. But for that, households would still have to wait for the monsoon, and that is three months away.
WATER!

For the parched and thirsty capital, the only hope on the horizon is the Melamchi project that aims to bring glacier melt from the Langtang National Park to Sundarijal via a 16km tunnel. The project has been planned for 15 years, but it still seems like a mirage.

The project was delayed by political instability and the conflict, but things started moving two years ago. It is now slated for completion by 2013 after the signing of a Rs 4.28 billion contract with a joint venture between a Chinese company and a local company.

There are still critics who say there are cheaper alternatives to Melamchi, but their voices have gone hoarse. Experts say just fixing the capital’s Rana-era water mains would increase water supply by 40 per cent because that is the proportion that is lost to leaky pipes. Another alternative to Melamchi would be to build a series of reservoirs on the Valley rim to store water from the Bagmati’s tributaries.

Melamchi mirage

ECONOMIC TIMES
Being illiterate, remembers Khima Nepali used to mourn over her customers’ orders by heart. But when business started to pick up, the 37-year-old realised she couldn’t remember it all. Khima felt the urge to learn to read even more when she attended a training program and found her illiterate classmates having a head start.

So, with support from her family, the feisty mother enrolled in Grade 1 of a local school in Karjahi in Dang, where she studies in the same classroom as her seven-year-old daughter.

Khima’s pioneering efforts to hit the books have been an inspiration to other illiterate women in Karjahi, and 30 other women have enrolled in Grade 1 and 2. They share a common desire to be empowered by education. “My parents are dead and I can’t even express of their rights, especially in education. To them, this is like opening up a third eye.”

Headmaster Hokum Subedi is enthusiastic about his 32 new adult students who sit within their children in the same classes. He says: “Their participation has been a positive example for the community, motivating and encouraging women to seek formal education.”

Despite being adults, all school rules apply for the mothers as well. They can’t be absent, they have to finish their homework, and they sit for the same tests as their children. Subedi says the mothers are doing well, with more than 60 per cent attaining first division passes in the term exams.

“Before the restoration of multiparty democracy, most women were confined within their homes and hesitant to speak in public,” says English teacher Rani Hari Bijail, “now they are more outspoken and expressive of their rights, especially in education. To them, this is like opening up a third eye.”

This is the case for Asharami Chaudhari whose parents were brought up as illiterate kamaiyas and kamalaris. For the mother of five, literacy holds the promise of a brighter future. Most sponges have also been supportive of their wives’ decision.

“My husband and I came to a consensus that he would earn money while I go to school,” says Krishna Chaudhari, “and he wants me to teach him what I’ve learnt at home!”

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However, the presence of parents in the classroom can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, the parent–teacher partnership can be strengthened with mothers working together with teachers in solving problems. But classroom dynamics become challenging for teachers as the pace of learning is so different.

“It’s hard to manage a classroom where ages and natures are so different,” says teacher Sita Sharma, “some mothers felt it was hard to concentrate and wanted to be in a separate room.”

Despite the enrolment of mothers picking up, Subedi says there just isn’t the space to have a separate classroom for them. Most mothers have below-subsistence income, so can’t afford stationery and school material.

Says Subedi: “It’s a pity, we just don’t have the resources. There is so much enthusiasm that more mothers want to join schools.”

Sixteen-year-old Emry Prajapati had been preparing conscientiously for her SLC exams last month. One day, while trying to light candles at home during a power cut she got severely burnt. The 16-year-old was rushed to hospital with serious burns below her waist. There was only a month to go for the exam and Emry was worried.

But last week at the Burns Unit of Bir Hospital, there was Emry her legs bandaged and in considerable pain, taking her SLC accounts paper in the wards with an invigilator and security official in attendance (pictured left). Always someone to look at the bright side, Emry says it was easier to study in the hospital because there was no load-shedding.

She thinks she’d have performed better if it hadn’t been for the accident, but adds she has done well in all her papers. “I hope to get above 70 per cent,” she says confidently.

Megh Raj Bajagai, Emry’s science teacher said: “Emry is among our most diligent students, we were hoping she’d get a distinction, so we couldn’t let the accident discourage her.”

Bir Hospital has registered an increase in the number of burn cases after the 16-hour daily power cuts went into effect this winter. Says the Burns Unit in-charge Nara Devi Bariya: “There is a burn case very other day, and although not all the cases are because of load shedding, it has certainly increased the risk factor.”

Bariya recalls the case of a young man last month who died of 90 per cent burns over his body. He had stored petrol in his house because of the fuel shortage. With no electricity, he had been checking up on his fuel start with a candle. The Kathmandu Fire Brigade also says that fire incidents have significantly increased since load shedding started.

For most families who can’t afford inventors and generators, candles and oil lamps are the only alternative. Combined with the exams, this increased the risk of burns as many students fell asleep while studying at night.

See also: ‘A burning issue’, #382
Admissions Open for A Level

Rato Bangala School, a registered centre for Cambridge International Examinations in Nepal, is seeking keen students for its A Level (Advanced Level) programme. Candidates will be selected through a competitive qualifying entrance examination.

Students who have passed SLC or equivalent (including those who have recently appeared for the SLC) are eligible to apply.

Separate entrance tests will be taken for Science and Non Science candidates.

For the incoming students, the two-year A Level course will begin in June 2009.

Rato Bangala offers the Science, Commerce as well as Humanities with the following subjects:

- Accounting, Art and Design, Biology, Business Studies, Chemistry, Economics, English Language and Literature, Environmental Management, General Paper, Mathematics, Physics, Psychology and Sociology.

Interested candidates and parents, please contact the School Office for the application package. Exceptional as well as deserving candidates can also apply for financial aid.

- Forms will be given out on 19, 20 & 21 April from 9:00 am - 2:00 pm.
- Completed applications must be submitted by 27 April.

Sri Durbar Tole, Patan Dhoka, Lalitpur
Tel: 5534318, 5534205, 5522614
email: rbs@mos.com.np
In this interview with Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal printed in the Wednesday edition of the Finnish news magazine, Suomen Kuvalehti, Katri Merikallio asks him about his commitment to democracy, the free press and the future of the peace process. Excerpts:

What are your expectations with the visit to Finland?
I am fully satisfied with the trend of cooperation. There is tremendous and big change going on in Nepal and the people have high expectations. I hope that cooperation can be enhanced particularly in education and forestry, not just for conservation but also the commercial use of forests. We also expect more help and cooperation in the constitution drafting process. We would also like to encourage investment in the IT sector.

Suomen Kuvalehti: How would you describe your past seven months in power?
Pushpa Kamal Dahal: Everybody knows that we are going through a very delicate and sensitive transition period. We have many challenges, but altogether I can conclude that things are going ahead step by step, facing many twists and turns, in the process of drafting a new democratic constitution.

What would be your three main challenges?
Peace, unit and unless this unique and homogenous peace process is not concluded there is always the danger of instability and anarchy. We need to take this historic peace process to its logical conclusion. The second challenge is to build a consensus between all the political parties. We have broad areas of agreement on the form of democracy, human rights, rule of law, independent judiciary and freedom of press, but there are some issues where we still need to agree: what kind of federalism we need, how power will be shared between the people in the Maoist movement in India or not. There are some who support the multiparty democracy and some extremely right. When I took the peace process under my party extreme left, extreme right, vigilantism and the progressive more dialectic and realistic tendency is now dominant. The extremist tendency has been defeated.

Youth, your Maoist are you? (Laugh) Very interesting question. I always understood Marxism, Leninism, Maoism as a social struggle, and that conflict analysis is the soul of social science. All the great leaders of the proletariat, Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao said that nothing should be mechanically copied from one revolution or one country. We have to analyse the situation and understand the dynamics of change. If you mechanically copy what Mao did in China then you're not a real Maoist. There are some who want to dogmatically apply what Mao did, but China itself has changed.

How about the Maoist movement in India? Revolutions can't be exported or imported. They do in India is solely their responsibility. There are some communist parties in India - some are extremely left and some extremely right. When I took the path of multiparty democracy and embarked on the peace process there was serious debate within the Maoists in India about whether they should follow the Maoists in Nepal or not. There are some people in the Maoist movement in India who oppose us and say we have abandoned revolution, but there are those who say that what Pushpa is doing is correct and that we should learn from his experience.

Meanwhile, back in Kathmandu
After returning from his visit to Norway and Finland, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal lashed out at political parties, the judiciary and the media. Some sound bites from the past week:

● “Those trying to obstruct the peace process under the Maoist Government are criminals and murderers…They must be chased away like bhayakur.”
● “The media are under the control of feudalists, capitalists and reactionary forces.”
● “Big media houses are run by smugglers…they are misleading the majority of the country’s population with wrong information. Since smugglers and capitalists are very active in the media sector, it will be very tough to win the war over the control of the country’s media but if we move ahead with a pro-people media that fight can easily be won.”
Pedal power

Nirjala Tamrakar, 28, started bicycling out of necessity when she used to go to AVM School in her native Patan. Then, bicycling became a hobby. Now it is a passion. Especially after she came a commendable second in the grueling 405km Kanchenjunga Mountain Bike Expedition held in Sikkim last month, Tamrakar is determined to do better in international bicycling tournaments. Nepal’s most noted woman mountain biker has been taking part in championships since 2001 coming either first or second in most. “It was a great feeling, I became someone in place of no one,” says Nirjala, describing the moment when she received her prize in Sikkim. Despite her motivation, it hasn’t been easy for Nirjala. A proper mountain bike can cost up to Rs 300,000 and the bike suit can be expensive. A coach, specialised diet and lots of time to train are also needed. “The male bikers are very supportive because I am the only woman,” says Nirjala, who has worked as a medical transcriptionist and even taught yoga to earn money. Nirjala takes encouragement not just from her successes, but also her failures. She says coming last in the Annapurna Mountain Bike race in 2006 goaded her work harder. “It was snowing and the bike was 18kg and I just ran out of stamina,” she recalls, “but after that I decided I was going to practice and improve my endurance.”

She went on to complete the 1,150km Lhasa-Kathmandu Mountain Bike race in 17 days and hopes now to take part in international tournaments. Nirjala sometimes regrets not having time for studies, family and friends. Yet, she feels proud of being able to represent Nepal in many national and international races as the only female participant. Nirjala’s other hobby is painting and she has won the first prize in the Mandala Art Competition two years in a row in 2003-4. She hopes to have a solo art exhibition soon.

Binita Dahi

The long march

CHONG ZI LIANG

Forget trekking in the majestic Himalaya. There are great hiking routes in this country that thus far have been neglected by tourists. Nepal’s highways. And I chanced upon this discovery quite serendipitously on a recent reporting assignment.

I was trying to get from Chinchu to Kohalpur by bus, but as luck would have it there was a chhuka jam called because of the death of a UML cadre 300 km to the west from Kathmandu in Butwal. I had planned to catch a micro willing to break the banda, but after a lunch stop the driver decided he was going to respect the strike after all and disgorged us all together with our luggage.

Forced to abandon our plans, we all had a gentle downhill tumble and walked for 10km. At the start virtually ensured we weren’t going to slow every plant could be admired in its entirety. But if I thought the uphill walk was tough, going down was a nightmare. The Nepalis I was hiking with decided to take a shortcut through a steep downhill stretch. My clumsy city feet were slipping on every pebble, root or stretch of dirt.

A highway hike also reveals the legendary Nepali hospitality. Sensing I was in trouble, two Nepalis slowed down during my downhill tumble and walked with me as the rest of them disappeared out of sight. One of them even carried one of my bags.

A long march along Nepal’s highways is the only way to bond with the locals and get up close and personal with Nepalis. By mid-afternoon, we had come off the hilly portion of our forced march. The final 10km stretch of straight road to Kohalpur now was a gentle descent through forest. I have heard that on the established mountain hiking circuits, food and other essentials are sold at unusually high price. In this aspect, the highway route will not disappoint. Shops along the last 10km stretch were nice enough to provide us with an authentic hiking experience as well by jacking up their prices. It’s all demand and supply—how much you pay in Nepal depends entirely on how desperate you are to buy what is on offer.

By the time we stumbled into Kohalpur, we probably looked like a posse of hombres walking into a wild west town after being lost in the desert. My legs had stopped feeling any pain and had been on autopilot during the final five km.

So, to all you tourists out there: why pay for a hiking permit that is obviously overpriced because you are a foreigner? Why shell out for that down jacket and waterproof boots? If ‘Naturally Nepal’ is what you seek, just board any bus out of Kathmandu and pray for a banda. Experience the trek of a lifetime.

CHONG ZI LIANG

The long march

is, the bus is simply too fast and all the scenery zips by the window before registering in the retina. An immediate uphill route (pictured, above) of eight km right at the start virtually ensured we weren’t going to slow every plant could be admired in its entirety. But if I thought the uphill walk was tough, going down was a nightmare. The Nepalis I was hiking with decided to take a shortcut through a steep downhill stretch. My clumsy city feet were slipping on every pebble, root or stretch of dirt.

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EXHIBITIONS
- Unexpressed Expressions by Sangee Shrestha, 20 April, 11AM-6PM, Siddhartha Art gallery. 4218048
- Birds, Butterflies & Wildlife of Nepal, a solo photo exhibition, 14-20 April in NAFA art gallery Bal Mandir, Narayal.
- In Plain View by Kelly Stacey, 10-17 April at Lazimpat Gallery Cafe at 11AM.
- Silent Witnesses, stencil artwork by Aymeric Hamon, till 24 April, 6 PM, The Bakery Café, Pulchowk.
- Caravan art show 2009 by Narayan Shrestha at Hotel Summit till 30 April. 9851000519

EVENTS
- Rachel Getting Married, movie starring Anne Hathaway, 11 April, 5.30 PM, Lazimpat Gallery Café. 4428649
- Lecture Series XXXI by Mark Turin, 5 pm , 14 April, Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka.
- 36th Yala Maya Kendra, a classical music series, 15 April, 5PM, Yala Maya Kendra, Patan Dhoka. 5553767
- Call for entries for Film South Asia by return of Bob Manes along Desmond Kilroy, Thamel. 4250440

EXHIBITIONS
- Kathmandu International Music Society, 18 April, 2-15-4.10 PM, British School hall. 8803608009
- Rock Classics by Robin O’Flattery and Anthony Correll, 5.30- 6 PM, Lazimpat Gallery. 4428648
- Sunday Jazz brunch and live jazz music at the Terrace, Hyatt Regency from 12-3.30 PM. 4491234
- Jazz evening at Ceilcos de France Restaurant every Wednesday, 11AM-2PM. 4260328
- Strings Band live every Tuesday at G’s Terrace Restaurant and Bar, Thame.
- Wednesday Melody at Jazzabbet Café. Happy hour 6-8PM and TGF party with live band Every Friday at 8PM. 2114075
- Some like it hot every Friday BBQ and live music by Chinek Rai and the Sound Minds, 7PM onwards, Rs 899 at Fusion, Dwarka’s Hotel. 4479485
- Happy cocktail hour, 5-7PM, ladies night on Wednesday with live unplugged music at Jatra Café & Bar.
- Live Sensation, performance by Yankey every Saturday, 9PM, Hyatt Regency, Kathmandu. 4491234.
- Fusion and Looza Band every Friday night, Bhumi Resto Lounge, Lazimpat. 4412193
- Fusion and Classical Music by Ali Shali every Wednesday, rock with Rashmi Singh every Friday, sufi & raga with Heman Rana every Saturday, 6PM onwards, Absolute Bar. 5521408

MUSIC
- Wednesday, 11AM-2PM. 4273999
- O’Flattery and Anthony Correll, 5.30- 8 PM. Lazimpat Gallery 4411818
- Chef Caroleine For Fine French and Mediterranean cuisine, Babar Mahal Revisited. 4263070
- High tea with scones and sandwiches everyday at the Lounge Terrace, Hyatt Regency from 12-3.30 PM. 4491234.
- Fusion and Classical Music by Anil Shahi every Wednesday, at the Asahi Lounge, operated by Dwarika’s Group of Hotels,  9AM-10PM. 4425341
- Fusion of Marcela Ragan’s new menu and Mannie’s new bar at Dhokhalka Café. 5522113
- Plat Du Jour at Hotel Shangri La, Kathmandu. Rs 600. 4412999
- Pasta pesto passion at La Dolce Vita, Thamel. 4700612
- Home made pasta at Alfresco, Soaltee Crowne Plaza. 4273999
- Reality Bites, The Kaiser Café, Garden of Dreams, operated by Dwarka’s Group of Hotels. 9AM-10PM. 4253341
- Cocktails, mocktails and liqueurs at the Aashi Lounge, opening hours 1-10PM, above Himalayan Java, Thamel.
- Starry night barbecue at Hotel Shangri-la with live performance by Ciney Gurung, Rs 999, at the Shambala Garden, every Friday 7PM onwards. 4412999

DINING
- Easter celebration, 12 April at Kyro, Thamel. 4250440
- Dhaan. Indian food festival, till 11 April, Garden terrace, Soaltee Dhokaima Café. 4748392
- Australian Food Promotion, till 12 April, from 6PM onwards. Hyatt regency. 4491234
- Gourmet trout at Olive Garden, 6PM onwards at Rs 850+, Radisson Hotel, Lazimpat. 4411818
- Live unplugged music at Jatra Café & Bar.
- Fusion and Classical Music by Anil Shahi every Wednesday, rock with Rashmi Singh every Friday, sufi & raga with Heman Rana every Saturday, 6PM onwards, Absolute Bar. 5521408

ABOUT TOWN
- Starry night barbecue at Hotel Shangri-la with live performance by Ciney Gurung, Rs 999, at the Shambala Garden, every Friday 7PM onwards. 4412999

WEATHER
- Good news for those praying for rains. This satellite picture shows a system moving down from the Persian Gulf right up to western Nepal. A low pressure area hanging over northern India is favourable to bringing rain along the midhills. There is some doubt about how much moisture this system contains, but it could revive the afternoon showers that stopped after some intermittent summer showers. The sunny intervals this weekend will be hot, and summer-like temperatures with the minimum temperatures crossing into the double digits.

FOR INCLUSION IN THE LISTING SEND INFORMATION TO EDITORS@NEPALTIMES.COM
POLITICAL GAMES: Following an 11-year lapse, the Fifth National Games opened on Monday. PM Pushpa Kamal Dahal directed the Sports Council to include the PLA team, prompting the Nepal Army Club to withdraw from the games.

PUMP UP THE POWER: Judges at the body building contest of the Fifth National Games resort to battery-powered lamps during loadshedding on Tuesday.

LITTLE VOICES: UNICEF executive board members, representing the Bahamas, China, Ethiopia, Germany, Russia and Switzerland, visit the Vishwakarma Community Organisation at the early childhood development centre in Kalika VDC, Kaski.

DIGGING A DREAM: Caterpillar trucks flatten a five hectare site in Kabhresthali, near Nagarjun, in preparation for the construction of an apartment complex.

SAYING GRACE: Australian Ambassador Susan Grace inaugurates the Australian Food Promotion at the Hyatt Regency on 3 April. The festival will go on till 12 April.
I t was bound to happen sooner or later RM and CCMCPSC have finally said they want to have nothing to do with our Buddhas and have started divorce proceedings. This can only mean one of two things: that our own Revolutionary Left Wing and its youth vanguard (called ‘Red Guards’, for old times sake) will be seen by international commies as the genu-wine article. Or, being unshackled from the doctrinaire comrades at the Revolutionary International Movement will allow the UCPN-M to turn into Euro-communists. Either way, it just goes to prove that one can always be much more fashionably hardline about someone else’s revolution than one’s own.

Another RM/Mani CCMCPSC member is the Communists Party of Afghanistan-Maoists (yes, even there), and it has just fired a salvo at our own Maoibuddies for not stopping Gurkha recruitment. Shola Jawid, the mouth organ of the Afghan comrades have written a snarling letter to our comrades warning ‘The new government of Nepal including its leading body the CPN-M not only have not opposed the presence of Nepalese armed lackeys in Afghanistan but they have ... allowed it to happen.”

Why did Bhusan Dahal have to go all the way to Oslo to interview Comrade Stupendific? Dahal began with the icebreaker: “What a coincidence that we should meet here in Oslo.” Whereupon Dahal replied: “It’s not a coincidence, haven’t we been together here for three days already?” Oopps. Then Dahal fired to corner Dahal by asking him how it felt to come from a country of darkness to a country of light to meet a king. After praising His Majesty Harald V’s grasp of climate change, Dahal went on to disclose that he actually tried “til the last moment” in 2006 to convince Kingi to be a constitutional monarch. Wait a minute, wamn? Awesome supposed to be batting for a republic then?

Two days after waxing eloquent in Helsinki about his commitment to the studio this week, to psychoanalyse the primordial minister. Their conclusion: delusions of grandeur, megalomania, paranoia and an attempt to mask failures. The latest criticism concerns his attempt to mask failures. The latest criticism concerns his junta. After spending ten days abroad, Terrifico told the press on his return: “Things have got bad enough for a politician in this country, and cried. Then evening news on tv broadcast over and over again his speech in Kabul Much where he thundered against just about every politician in this country, and then promptly broke down and cried.

Why did one of the major actors in the Maoist revival, Fittingly symbolic, whoever had written a snarling letter to our Maoibuddies who wanted “feudal owners of media houses” to turn into Euro-communists. Remember the Singapore policeman who was kidnapped in broad daylight last week by six Maoibuddies who wanted Rs 60 million and were arrested while taking possession of a suitcase full of make-believe currency notes? Well, guess what the name of their hideout in Thamel was? Naya Nepal Guest House.

General notes?

The answer is blowing in the wind

The Afghan comrades have