Which one political figure would you choose to lead Nepal towards prosperity, peace and democracy?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Figure</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pushpa Kamal Dahal</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baburam Bhattarai</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Madhav Kumar Nepal</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sher Bahadur Deuba</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
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How should we resolve the current political deadlock?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form Maoist-led government</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Form UML-led government</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Form NCP-led government</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Form Nepali Congress-led government</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All parties should work together</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
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<td>Power to the King</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
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<td>Power to the President</td>
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<td>No comment</td>
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Looking for leaders

A new public opinion survey shows most Nepalis don’t think the present crop of leaders can lead the country to prosperity and peace.

The most dramatic finding of this year’s nationwide Himalmedia public opinion survey is that there is a leadership void in the country. More than 5,000 respondents in 38 districts were asked last month which one public figure would be able to deliver prosperity, peace and democracy. Nearly one third couldn’t think of anyone or didn’t want to say. But of those who were pinpointed, Maoist leaders Pushpa Kamal Dahal (20.2%) and Baburam Bhattarai (14.7%) led the pack, with the rest in a long tail of single digits.

But asked which three parties they would trust to lead Nepal to prosperity, the respondents reaffirmed their faith in the Big Three. Unlike in the 2008 elections, the Nepali Congress and the Maoists were neck-to-neck, named by 57% and 56.2% of respondents, with UML at 52.8% per cent and MFP at 7.2%.

At a time when royalist parties have been calling for a referendum on monarchy and secularism, the poll results show that 7 out of 10 Nepalis think it was right to declare Nepal a republic. More than half (52.2%) believe Nepal’s Hindu statehood should be restored; this should be seen in light of the fact that 88.2% of respondents were Hindu.

There is a seeming paradox in that a third of respondents felt the Maoists were the biggest obstacle to the peace process, while at the same time the vast majority of those who suggested a solution felt the party needed to be involved in the peace process by being included in government.

Detailed analysis: Page 12-13
VOX POPULI

Infectious optimism

It shouldn’t come as any surprise to our political leadership that there is sobering realization that the Nepali people are sick and tired of their inability to build on the success of the 2006 pro-democracy movement and move the peace process forward. The result of the HIMALmedia poll in this issue proves just how widespread the disillusionment is, and is accompanied by a growing fear that political squabbles have squandered the gains of the past few years and the country is headed back to conflict.

It should come as no surprise to our present rulers that when asked to name one personality who could lead the country to prosperity and peace, most respondents didn’t know or didn’t say. And it should be shock therapy to NC and UML that when people do name leaders, the two who come out on top are both Maoists. Even though NC (as well as the Maoists and UML) does well in the response to support for political parties, the combined poll votes for the three Kangresis bring a party leadership don’t even reach double digits.

A s I readied myself to come to Nepal, I started to follow the news more closely. I knew I was coming to a country that was struggling out of a decade-long conflict, and had my doubts about the democratic process as well as respect for the rights of women and children.

But a week-long trip in mid-western Dang changed those impressions. The people I met in the villages, mainly women and children, shocked my optimism about Nepal. I met many women in Dang, some of whom were women’s committee members, female community health volunteers undergoing training, teachers, and women working relentlessly to mediate cases of domestic violence.

In Hapur, VDC members of the Women’s Federation told us how fewer babies are being born ill to treatable diseases, and no babies had died in recent years from diarrhoea or pneumonia. Because of watch groups for safe childbirth, no mother had died during childbirth.

In Dakhpur village the women showed us charts illustrating how immunization rates, school enrolment, toilet construction, birth registration, family planning and consumption of iodized salt have all gone up. Death rates and unattended births have dipped. I marveled at how this was achieved despite the armed conflict. The women told me this was possible because they were doing it themselves. Their grassroots movement was not singed by the wildfire of the conflict. Witnessing this first hand helped rekindle my belief that the roots of democracy lie in a decentralized system where the decision makers are those whose lives are affected by development programs. A bottom-up planning system can trickle up from the community to the district level.

In Dang, Nepal’s grassroots movement has not been singed by the wildfire of the conflict.

When I heard about the issues Nepali women were trying to overcome—poverty, ill health, malnutrition, illiteracy—I was reminded of Sweden about a century ago. Like here, it was a movement by the non-government and non-state that first pushed for social reforms.

The children I met during my trip also filled me with hope. In Hapur, they told me how difficult it was to convince their elders to construct toilets and not defecate in the open. These children wanted us to provide adult education classes for their parents! In a tiny classroom in Tulsipur, decorated with children’s artwork, boys and girls shared their dreams with us. Most hard to work and were only allowed to be children for two hours a day at school. Guided by a caring teacher, these children explored a new world through books. They wanted to become doctors and teachers, and despite their hard lives, they were full of hope. Their optimism was infectious!

In Nepal, young poor educators who reached out to those at risk of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, I am amazed by the immense courage these youngsters demonstrated. When they emphasized the importance of sex education, I was taken back several decades, when a young teenager I had advocated for the same in our school, following the expulsion of a pregnant schoolmate.

I didn’t get the chance to tour a lot of Nepal, but whatever I saw convinced me that the women and children of Nepal, often with the support of the men, are on their way to becoming very capable future leaders. Once Nepal has a democratic constitution and local governance flourishing again, this can become a reality.

Guest Column

Birgitta Dahl was MP in Sweden for 34 years. Speaker of the House for 8 years and Minister of Education and Energy for 9 years. She is now President of UNICEF Sweden.
Kathmandu’s élites cannot seem to understand who these people are. But talk to the cab-driver, waiter, vegetable seller, small shopkeeper, slum dweller or construction worker and you will get an idea of who may dominate the streets from Saturday.

There has been coercion in the process of mobilisation. But the Maoists have essentially tapped into the three core contradictions of Nepali society – ethnicity, class, and space (Kathmandu versus the rest). They have constitutionalism and democracy. They have highlighted Maoist extermination, use of violence, and portrayed the movement as one aimed to “capture the state”. The idea is to sound reasonable – look, we are willing to give up, but the Maoists are not committed to democracy.

A core group of ministers, which includes hardliners like Bijay Gachchhadar, Balam Rawal and Bidya Bhandari, will monitor the situation and respond accordingly. A tough cop, Ramesh Khard, has been given charge of Kathmandu. And NA has been asked to be prepared.

The government’s initial premise was that the Maoists were bluffing and would not be able to mobilise. Now, their assumption is that they are only party workers and not the general public; citizens will turn against the Maoists for disrupting their daily lives; and the Maoist base of daily wage labourers will soon tire. If the state can stall firms for a few days, this argument goes, the Maoists will be “exposed” and have no choice but to compromise.

In reality, the government is on the back foot. Unlike the Maoists who have reached out to social groups directly, the government has relied on the media to put forth its version. Madhav Nepal’s suggestion that there should be a third candidate instead of Prachanda or him has been given charge of Kathmandu. And NA has been asked to be prepared. The government’s initial premise was that the Maoists were bluffing and would not be able to mobilise. Now, their assumption is that they are only party workers and not the general public; citizens will turn against the Maoists for disrupting their daily lives; and the Maoist base of daily wage labourers will soon tire. If the state can stall firms for a few days, this argument goes, the Maoists will be “exposed” and have no choice but to compromise.

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The coming days will be a tightrope act for both the government and the Maoists. For its part, the government has to answer some very difficult questions internally and externally. How much will be enough? What if the government doesn’t blink for a week – do you turn more violent? How do you arrive at a consensus, which will involve giving up certain demands, when street passions are at their peak? If a non-Prachanda led government is the only solution even then, what was the utility of the movement in the first place? And what if NA joins the fray?

The ideal scenario is a package deal by Friday or even Saturday night, that allows Maoists to convert the crowds into a victory procession and send them back home. Positions will only get more entrenched as the movement progresses. But perhaps a round of limited confrontation is inevitable, to break the stagnation and stabilise the balance of power.

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Lost in the smog

The government doesn’t seem to care about Kathmandu’s worsening air pollution

In the absence of PM 10 readings, other indicators suggest Kathmandu’s air pollution may be getting worse. The number of patients suffering respiratory problems in some of Kathmandu’s hospitals has risen over the last couple of years. PM10 levels at Norvic Hospital says, “About 300,000 people have come to Norvic seeking treatment for respiratory problems over the last four years, which is a massive increase. Growing air pollution is one important reason why.”

Aside from disorganised urbanisation and the garbage problem, traffic exhaust and industrial fumes are major contributors to air pollution in the capital. The geographic structure of the valley is such that a dense layer of smog is formed, trapping all dust particles in the atmosphere during winter.

Government regulation has not been effective in controlling air pollution. Vehicle Emission Standards (VES) first endorsed in 1995, are routinely violated. Last month, the Prime Minister’s vehicle was spotted being driven into Singh Darbar, leaving behind a jet of black smoke, without a green sticker, signifying that it had not met VES. When the media reported this, people from the Department of Transport Management immediately pasted a green sticker on the windshield of the PM’s car.

The government also phased out diesel three-wheeler Vikram temps from Kathmandu and legislated a ten per cent additional tax per year on vehicles older than 15 years, but only after failing to ban the use of vehicles older than 20 years. Bhushan Tuladhar, executive director at the Environment and Public Health Organization (ENPHO) says removing old vehicles from Kathmandu alone could reduce pollution by 20 per cent.

There are no new programs to improve air quality because of a lack of resources. However, the private sector could help the government in formulating policies and plans. “We can help the government to improve the environment, in fact we have plans ready,” says Tuladhar. “All we need is cabinet endorsement and implementation.”

Poor regulation is costing legal water bottlers and consumers dearly

“Illegal bottlers have a huge price advantage over their legal counterparts since they don’t invest in proper purification processes and techniques,” says industry specialist Jogendra Prasad Rauniar. Illegal bottlers either fill used containers purchased from recognised brands or buy easily available caps and labels, which cost Rs 2-5, to mislead consumers. Since they forgo the purification process, the production cost per litre bottle is just Rs 10-15. This is about Rs 5 less than the production cost per bottle borne by legitimate companies.

The purification process varies depending on the source of the water: river, spring or groundwater. Most companies in Kathmandu use groundwater and run it through at least three filters to eradicate any chemicals or microbiological matter and ‘soften’ it to make it less harsh on the digestive system. While many of these companies market their products as mineral water, in fact no minerals or nutrients are added, as that would raise prices to uncompetitive levels.

This is usually enough to meet DFTQC requirements. Those who are caught flouting requirements are fined Rs1,000-2,000 and have their license revoked if they are guilty of multiple offences. Last year, four bottling companies were shut down. However, regulators are strapped for cash and manpower. They are only 10 inspectors for the valley, though at least 40 to 50 are required, and they operate according to an outdated food security act dating from 1987.

Pramod Koirala, a regulator with DFTQC, says, “We have drafted a new act, but this cannot come into effect until the constitution is completed. The new act will increase penalties, which currently reflect 1960 prices, and increase the number of food inspectors.

Be that as it may, the regulatory measures may be wrong-headed. ‘Current regulation focuses on the safety of the final product, but more emphasis should be placed on the cleanliness of the source of water, “says conservationist Hum Gurung.

What’s worse, a price war and unhealthy competition between companies have led to the cannibalisation of profit margins. “Many companies are selling their products at a loss. A bottle should cost at least Rs 15-20, but is often sold at less than Rs 10 in bulk,” says Suman Pradhan of the Nepal Bottle Water Industries Association (NBWIA). NBWIA is at the forefront of a campaign to counter such challenges by bringing more awareness about bottled water, encouraging healthy competition and improving consumer awareness.

In the last two years, many city-level associations have formed under its wing.

“We must make safety our number one priority. It will be tough, but there is a hopeful future for this industry,” says Pradhan.
Asymmetric information

FOURTH ESTATE C K Lal

The gushing travelogue Arundhati Roy wrote about her experience of being embedded with the Maoists appears to have created a spot of bother for the celebrated activist and author. The Director General of Police is contemplating action against her under the draconian Chattisgarh Special Public Security Act. The anger against the Maoists is so strong among the combatible classes that the voice of a few civil society activists may not be enough to prevent her arrest.

The middle class is on the warpath against what Premier Manmohan Singh has repeatedly characterised as the greatest security threat to the Indian republic. The business community is buying for the blood of the Maoists. Millitant Hindu groups have always detested leftwing movements. Now an influential section of the Hindu community is baying for the arrest of Arundhati Roy.

Indian Home Minister P. Chidambaram can be forgiven for exclaiming that he will “wipe out the Maoists in two to three years”. The media has to see through the bluster.

Here at last is something Nepalis can teach Indians: media coverage of a Maoist conflict

The parties were hopeful that PLA integration would begin shortly as the ‘modalities’ had, more or less, already been worked out, although disagreements remain as to the numbers of combatants to integrate. The parties also vowed to restart ‘consensual’ politics. But there was also a hostile undercurrent, as the Maoist leaders faced some angry questions with regard to its planned strike this weekend.

SAARC summit

Climate change topped the agenda at the 16th SAARC summit held in Thimpu on Wednesday. Leaders of the region’s eight countries, trade as an antidote to shared economic challenges, and met to roll-back the effects of this intensifying problem. The summit saw the establishment of the US$300 million SAARC Development Fund, which aims to reduce poverty in the region.

Understandably, the announcement caused disquiet and foreign envoys immediately met Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Baburam Bhattarai to express concern. Adding to the unease is the reality of thousands of Maoist cadres from across the country pouring into the Kathmandu Valley in preparation for the protests. One PLA commander was caught carrying 36 hand grenades and a khukuri. UNMIN was quick to condemn the commander as ‘estranged’, but the massacre of 76 CRPF jawans at Dantewada was a real act of terrorism.

Indian Home Minister P. Chidambaram can be forgiven for exclaiming that he will “wipe out the Maoists in two to three years”. The media has to see through the bluster.

When the Maoist insurgency began in Nepal, the media here was still on a learning curve. Leftwing romanticism enticed some influential reporters into depicting armed guerrillas as romanticism. But by and large, the Nepali media avoided the “us against them” oversimplification, even though the conflict here has been far more ruthless and has consumed many more lives than the 40-year-old Naxalite insurgency.

Enough Nepali journalists have been to India to see how the supposedly largest democracy of the world. Perhaps now it’s time to invite some Indian mediapersons to Kathmandu to show them methods of coping with the asymmetrical warfare of misinformation. The Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels once said, “Think of the press as a great keyboard on which the government can play.” The Indian media needs to contemplate the consequences of accepting such a role. Not that we need to go that far, but we have been better learners and need to revisit our own experiences to face the challenges of an uncertain future better.
Chanting for consensus

Strictly Business
Ashutosh Tiwari

Consensus, the joke goes, is the most overused word in Nepali politics. In the last two years alone, if you were to be paid a rupee each time the word was mentioned in the press, you would be a billionaire by now. All political leaders talk about the need for consensus. Most end speeches calling for consensus. Yet a lack of it is about to bring

other side can be persuaded to give a little as well, so that, over time, both parties can make progress towards a middle ground. This sort of all-or-nothing behaviour hardens positions instead; sets a bad precedent, and makes future negotiations all the more difficult. Unless a fresh set of leaders take over our political parties (and it’s increasingly unclear how new leadership will come about) to sweep away these cobwebs of hardened positions, chants for consensus are just that: chants.

The youths and children, or for that matter, from the concerns of the voters, that there is not much of a common national reference for them to refer to when they negotiate with one another to push work ahead.

Vague phrases like ‘New Nepal’ can only go so far as a common reference before confusing everyone. And in an electoral system which, by design, makes elected representatives disproportionately more accountable to their party leaders than to the voters that elected them, few politicians have to

the country to a standstill this weekend and beyond, making life difficult for millions of Nepalis, and enlarging the dark cloud of uncertainty over Nepal.

How then to unravel this apparent paradox: that the greater need for consensus. Most end speeches calling for consensus. Yet a lack of it is about to bring

say that politics is the art of the possible never took account of the psyche of the Nepali politician. Our politicians’ world-view is that giving an inch to the other party under any circumstance is a sign of weakness, and one that is equated with a loss of face within one’s own group and the larger political landscape.

It does not matter whether the

No common frame of reference: Most of our political conversations share little common frame of reference besides the fact of our being Nepali – an identity which is itself under assault at present. In the West, politicians losing their soaring rhetoric around what’s right for their countries’ youth and children, who, as everyone knows, make up the generation that’s coming next. The booming economies of China and India have given their politicians and the citizens a dose of self-confidence to realise that their countries matter on the global stage.

But in a country where half the population of 27 million citizens in 20 or under (i.e. not even born at the time of Jana Andolan 1), so divorced are politicians from the concerns of

BoK campaign

Bank of Kathmandu marked its 16th anniversary by organising a staff rally as part of its Social Awareness Campaign, ‘Save for the Future’, on Saturday. The rally, starting from Kamaladi, passed through the thoroughfares of Kathmandu. The campaign aims to promote saving habits. Inaugurating the rally, bank chairman Narendra Kumar Basnyat said that the bank has been actively involved in making social contributions in various fields including health, education and environment, and the campaign is an attempt to make a contribution to the banking industry and society at large.

New showroom

Skoda K.A.W. has appointed Rachana Motors (P) Ltd as its new authorised dealer of Skoda vehicles for Biratnagar. Skoda Auto, a premium European automobile brand in Nepal, officially opened the doors of its new showroom on 28 April in Bargachhi.

SMS winner declared

The winner of the highest correct SMS prize of a SONY BRAVIA 22” LCD TV for Dabur Reaf’s ‘Score the Real Goal’ is Sunika Lama. She entered a total of 3866 correct entries to become the 4th weekly highest correct SMS prize winner, with Game 1 of ‘Score the Real Goal’ coming to an end. There will be a monthly bumper lucky draw prize of a Sony Bravia 32” LCD TV.

Round the clock service

Motor Auto Works, authorised sole distributor of Yamaha Motorcycle in Nepal, has opened its new showroom Extramile Pvt Ltd at Balkumari. The showroom offers excellent valuation for any kind of old bike, easy financing facilities to its valued customers and also sales of all available models of Yamaha Motorcycles. The showroom has also launched a special 24-hour service support to all Yamaha motorcycles inside the Kathmandu Valley, according to Anil Vetwal, MD of Extramile.

Teen sensation

16-year-old Ashbeer Saini won the Surya Nepal Masters held at Gokarna Forest Golf Resort last week. The Indian amateur made two late birdies to secure the title by two shots over Rupak Acharya. Saini shot a round of one-under 71, which took his tournament total to 11-under 277. Rupak made a bold charge but fell agonisingly short and despite holding the lead briefly in the final round, his last-round score of three-under 69 could only take his tournament total to nine-under 279. Sri Lankan amateur Mithun Perera finished in third place at two-under 286. Bangladesh’s Md Milon Ahmed finished ahead of Shiva Ram Shrestha in fourth place after the big-hitting local made a double bogey on the final hole to drop down the leaderboard to fifth place.

Classroom goes digital

After two years of experience in using Promethean’s interactive Whiteboard technologies, ActivClassroom in, primary grades. Utensil School team hosted a special event last Friday to demonstrate the nature and impact of utilizing digital educational technologies in the classroom. A group

of school leaders, teachers and students shared their experiences, the learning outcomes, the resources and opportunities that abound in making education go digital for Nepali students and Nepali teachers. Utensil is the first school in Nepal to use cutting edge digital educational resources in its teaching learning practice. The impact in the past two years of using ActivBoards has been so compelling, according to school authorities, that they have invested further in equipping all 18 classrooms with ActivBoards.

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ity living has many paradoxes to it, one of which is: there is so much going on, but you haven't the time to do it. Presumably one would have time to attend happenings in a rural setting, if there were anything happening at all.

One empty Saturday, I started with the idea of catching Edwin Koo and Debbie Ng's 'Bahini: life of my sisters' at the Nepal Art Council, making a double header of it with Siddhartha Art Gallery. And one thing led to another.

A saunter down Sanepa Hill and across the Bagmati Sewer, thence to Maitighar. In the cavernous ground floor of the Nepal Art Council, I peered at rather small photo frames that reflected light. A picture little documented took shape. Schoolgirls in class, but also schoolgirls at candle-lit homework and early morn housework in low-income households across the Kathmandu Valley.

Poverty is all around us, but do we see it save in dispatches in development reports? Venturing upstairs, I barged into a space disgorging some of the luminaries of the Nepali contemporary art scene. What I saw on the walls was a little less illuminating. Am I alone in thinking many Nepali artists choose to leapfrog into the abstract without consolidating fundamental draughtsmanship? But I'll be looking for the gems in the dross this weekend when 'A passage through the years (1965-2010)' opens at the same venue. The other half of the second floor was hosting a rather insipid selection of pen and ink drawings of temples and gallis, but at least here, I thought, the artist was working on the basics.

Across the road and leftwards to The Mahal That Was A Stable. I trod past the uberpriced and pretentious artisanal kiranas hosted by Babar in lieu of his horses, then ran Nepali Kukur's day out

the gauntlet of Chez Caroline on the way to Siddhartha Art Gallery. And? Jupiter Pradhan has a good thing going. The mixed media installations that make up 'Sojourn in Bangladesh' are of definite, if mixed, interest. If I had the cash money I might even have invested in some of his half-moon faces in walls, if not the somewhat amateurish metal lotuses upon which his protagonists agonised. Ganesh Santi Thapa appeared pleased I'd attended, but threats followed an invite to another event: be there or miss out!

Mulling over the significance of our new culture on demand, I retired to the shade of Walter's outdoor patio with an iced coffee and tepid juice. The heat ushered me into the cool interior of Naya Pasal opposite, but the prices pushed me back out again. Where better than Hong Kong Bajar? Via Singha Darbar then, where ol' Prithvi's pink-faced statue was once more being manhandled by self-proclaimed 'sweeper of Nepal' and local loon Laxman Singh Khadka. And down into the blue-tarped interior of the bajar, surprisingly cool and quiet, with only the gently insistent vendors murmuring as we passed: sufl ko kapada, sari, kurta...

I exited into Bhrikuti Mandap, and followed the masses to the delightful National Industrial Expo, where scores of stalls from all across the country sold honey, blankets, woodcraft, topis, khukuris, pickles, you name it. Nepal's got it, who needs Kupondole's boutiques? I didn't see a single expat, but it was clear many Nepalis were enjoying a day out. A man with beers all over his face was the star attraction, but it was the yarchagumba stall that drew those in the know.

Ey, so this is yarchagumba. What does it do? 'Sex power', proclaimed the youth standing over a glass case full of caterpillars with the famed herbs growing out their heads. Then, as if to temper his initial enthusiasm, 'Diabetes, fever, headache...'. Headache? At Rs 200 a worm, I'll stick with Cetamol. Shopped out with lapsi treats and gundruk ko achaar, I then crossed Tundikhel to Mahaboudha where, weekend notwithstanding, the DVD stores were open for perusal. Then into the Ne-warmen and out through Jamal for a bicycle helmet. But just as 15 years back I'd been told by a sneering jean-shop owner that 'nowadays bellybottom is not in style', a bike shop man shrugged, as if the ugliness of helmets were reason enough not to stock them. Ajkaal chaldaina. They're not in style, and who can blame them? Better dead than red (faced).

To read about other adventures of Nepali Kukur, visit www.nepalitimes.com/blogs/nepalikukur

What’s Nepali Kukur to do come Saturday? Why, take to the streets to explore the terrain

C

Nepali Kukur’s day out

To read about other adventures of Nepali Kukur, visit www.nepalitimes.com/blogs/nepalikukur
Art-iculating a new wave of talent

The art scene in Nepal has not always been able to promote its local talent to best effect. More often than not, exhibitions manifest a power struggle between local and foreign artists. However, Lalit Kala Campus, the first college to offer art education in Kathmandu, in collaboration with Siddhartha Art Gallery, is set to break the mould. ‘A Passage Through the Years (1965-2010)’ is opening at the Nepal Art Council on 29 April. It presents the biggest collection of local works, both classic and modern, ever shown in Nepal.

The exhibition is straightforward in its intentions: to showcase the works of about 70 painters and sculptors, ranging from the late masters to the current generation of teachers at Lalit Kala Campus. An impressive number of roughly 150 paintings and 30 sculptures will catalogue the achievements of some of Nepal’s most brilliant minds and dexterous hands.

But the exhibition is not only about pleasing the eye. With the introduction of a Masters Degree in Fine Arts, the first of its kind here, Lalit Kala Campus is looking for ways to fund the construction of a new resource centre for the curriculum and its students.

“Siddhartha Art Gallery is supporting the exhibition because students of fine arts are running without resources. We intend to do something for them,” says Sangita Thapa, director of Siddhartha Art Gallery and curator of the show.

Of the funds raised, 50 per cent will go to the artists themselves, and 20 per cent will be directed to Lalit Kala Campus. With even more incentive and support being lent to the new wave of Nepali artists, the art scene will be well worth your attention in the years to come.
GETAWAYS

The Last Resort: One-stop for Adventure Sports. Take your pick – be it a bungy jump over the Bhote Koshi river 160 metres below or mountain biking up to the Tibetan border, The Last Resort is paradise for adventure sports junkies. Relax after a full day of fun with great food and a cold beer at the Instant Karma bar before retiring to bed in deluxe safari tents. The Last Resort Sales Office, Mandala Street, Thamel, 4700525, www.thelastresort.com.np

The Great Escape, retreat from the hustle and bustle of the city to The Dwarikas’ Himalayan Shangri-La Village Resort in Dhulikhel. Just 45 minutes from Kathmandu, the short ride will afford you enchanting panoramic views and a myriad of nature’s best. Overnight packages available for local residents. The Dwarikas’ Himalayan Shangri-La Village Resort, Dhulikhel, 4479488, www.dwarikashimalayanshangrila.com

Fishing Expeditions and Day Trips, Tiger Mountain offers a chance to catch the Golden Mahseer, one of Asia’s most famous game fish, in Bardiya National park, while exploring the beauty of the Himalayan foothills. Perfect for this time of the year. Contact 4361500 for prices and reservation

Paragliding picnic, head towards Godavari on your favourite off-road bike, take a tandem paraglide flight with one of the experienced pilots (see review), and finish off with a picnic in Godavari Botanical Garden. Pick up also available, booking and info at 5536863, ktmparagliding.com

MUSIC

Hari Maharjan Project, arguably the best guitarist in Nepal, Hari Maharjan was also a band member of Nepathya. He released a new album recently and will be playing some new tunes. 30 April, House of Music, Thamel

Women in Concert, making a comeback for the seventh year running. Young female musicians will give their all for a highly charged concert for all music lovers. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to the Vidheya Shrestha Music Scholarship, which will allow women to pursue an education in music at the Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory. 8 May, 7-10.30pm, Garden of Dreams, Thamel

Sing On! The Kathmandu Chorale announces its spring concert. 8 May, 3.30pm and 6:00pm, The British School, Jhamsikhel, Lalitpur

April Fullest, Dance with DJ Max and DJ Flow, 30 April, 8pm, Cube, Kamaladi

EVENTS

A Passage Through the Years (1965-2010), a historical art exhibition featuring a galaxy of eminent and legendary painters and sculptors from Nepal. Curated by Sangeeta Thapa. Twenty per cent of the total sales will be donated to Lalit Kala Campus to set up a resource centre. Opens 29 April, Nepal Arts Council, Babar Mahal

Vrijmarkt Festival, buy and sell second-hand or self-made goods, play traditional Dutch games or show off any of your talents at the Queen’s Day Free Market Festival. 30 April, 12 noon to 4.30pm, Summit Hotel, Lalitpur, 5521610

Blood Bricks – Animals, People and the Environment, Animal Nepal directors, Pramada Shah and Lucia de Vries, talk about their love of animals during the monthly lecture organised by the Cultural Studies Group of Nepal. 30 April, 10am, Shankar Hotel, Lazimpat

The Boy Friend, a musical comedy coloured with romance, and an abundance of unexpected twists and turns. Follow Polly and Tony, the two lead characters, as they discover their feelings for each other, and discover for themselves what fate has in store for them. Expect lots of laughter. The Lincoln School, Ravi Bhawan, 7pm, Rs.500, 4270482

Young European Art, painting exhibition by three artists – Cathrin Biocca, Wies Olde Riekerink and Jonas Wijtenburg, hailing from Germany and the Netherlands. Runs till 11 May, Kathmandu Contemporary Arts Centre, Jhamsikhel, 5521120

Speed Dealer. New Arrival Speed Dealer.
KIRAN PANDAY

TAG, YOU’RE IT: A man dressed as Kal Bhairab plays tag with children in Bhaktapur on Sunday.

WEEKEND WEATHER

by NGAMINDRA DAHAL

KATHMANDU

FRI SAT SUN

30-14  29-14  30-16

A powerful low pressure zone has built up over central Tibet and the eastern Himalaya and is sucking in moisture-laden clouds from the west, heralding a significant change in the weather pattern. But the distribution of potential rainshowers is uncertain because of the region’s rugged and mountainous landscape. What can be determined, though, is that east Nepal will get a larger share of the precipitation than the west, which tends to get the larger share during non-monsoon months. Satellite pictures indicate that the Valley will get more afternoon showers, such as that we saw on Thursday, over the weekend.

TO FRIENDSHIP: The 16th South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation summit opens at the Grand Assembly Hall of Thimpu, Bhutan on Wednesday.

FOO CHEE CHANG

LIGTS, CAMERA, NO ACTION: Mediapersons stage a sit-in protest at Ranipokhari police station after police baton-charged a group of photojournalists on Tuesday at Trichandra and Pashupati campuses.

KIRAN PANDAY

FLEX MUSCLES: Maoist cadre, who arrived in Kathmandu from across the country for the May Day showdown exercise in Lainchaur on Thursday morning.

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FLEX MUSCLES: Maoist cadre, who arrived in Kathmandu from across the country for the May Day showdown exercise in Lainchaur on Thursday morning.
At the time of writing, my neighbour’s grandchildren have missed school for the fifth day. Instead of waking up early to pack their bags for school, they have been teasing dogs and encouraging them to battle each other in the alley, disrupting my morning snooze.

They had only been back to school for three days for the new academic session when the All Nepal National Independent Student Union Revolutionary (ANNISU-R) forced all private schools in the country to close. Almost five and a half million students will now remain at home indefinitely as ANNISU-R and the Private and Boarding Schools Organisation of Nepal (PABSON) spar over a 25 per cent increase in fees.

Private schools are registered as companies in Nepal and pay over 25 per cent tax on income, one fifth of which goes towards a fund to support government schools. The Maoist Party seems to recognise them as business entities, too. In 2009, then Finance Minister Baburam Bhattarai proposed taxing private schools an additional five percent so the government could reform the schools in its charge. “It is up to the schools to decide if they want to transfer [the cost] to parents. We don’t interfere,” he said.

If you recognise private schools as companies, and expect them to make a profit and pay taxes on that profit, why make a fuss when they restructure their service charges?

The Maoist students started their agitation a month after the decision to hike fees was made, without even looking for a negotiation. Were they simply looking to house their cadres in the closed schools before and during the planned May Day rally as Education Minister Sarbendra Nath Shukla alleged? As it turns out, over a dozen schools reported being asked to shelter out-of-town cadre on Wednesday (see pic).

If the private school system were an efficiently working market, then the consumer – the students’ guardians – would have more control over how the schools structure their fees. The catfights between PABSON and ANNISU-R would have to be taken out of the classroom, and not lead to school closures, because the guardians would take their children elsewhere. However, this is not an efficiently working market. Like so many things in Nepal, consumer rights are undermined by political capture.

It is particularly distressing in the case of schooling because guardians deem education of their children so important (rightly) that they are prepared to be ridden over roughshod by both schools that charge them ridiculous fees for non-existent facilities and powerful political unions. In Kathmandu, the cost of educating a primary school student is, on average, Rs 11,844 per year (without the admissions fee) while the average annual income is Rs 45,900. A principal at a well-regarded private school says parents are willing to pay beyond their means to ensure their children get what they consider is a good education.

The problem with the current system is that the guardians have no rights or bargaining power. No political party will come to their aid and risk being vilified as elitist when extra taxes get whacked onto private schools, or when they are fleeced with extra charges. What is needed is to secure consumer rights and improve their bargaining power. Regulation is only the means to the end of helping the real consumers, rather than politically affiliated student unions. Apolitical bargaining needs to be mobilised, too, so politics doesn’t hold the future of children hostage.

Ultimately, the debate should shift to whether education should be a profit-making industry. In many countries, educational institutions are given charity status and therefore are tax exempt. You cannot be penalised for seeking an education. It is a need, not a luxury. It should be treated as such.

If private schools are business entities, shouldn’t they operate as such?
An extended CA and a

What should be done if the Constituent Assembly (CA) is unable to complete writing the constitution by May 28?

- Extend the CA’s term: 42.6%
- Revert to the 1990 Constitution: 26.5%
- Hand over constitution-writing to experts: 7.8%
- Dissolve the CA and go for presidential rule: 7.8%
- Another revolution: 2.5%
- Don’t know: 12.7%

KUNDA DIXIT

In early April, Himalmedia conducted the latest in its series of nationwide public opinion surveys. The poll team, overseen by professor of political science at Tribhuvan University, Krishna Khanal, interviewed 5,005 respondents in 38 districts. This included a one-day poll (7 April) in 28 urban areas to aim for accuracy in a fast-changing political scenario.

The intention was to gauge public opinion and measure the gap between what the majority of Nepali people want and the preoccupations of the political parties, the relative popularity of those parties, and the level of trust people have in political personalities.

The most dramatic, but perhaps not surprising, outcome was how the public’s trust in the political leadership has plummeted since the elections in 2008. To the question ‘Since the demise of Girija Prasad Koirala, which political leaders do you trust to take the peace process forward and finish writing the constitution?’ respondents most favoured Maoist leaders Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Baburam Bhattarai with 38.7% and 29.7% respectively. But apart from Madhav Kumar Nepal (23.4%) and Sher Bahadur Deuba (20%), no other leaders have really made an impression on the public, with 27.8% choosing ‘don’t know’.

The poll also sought answers to public perceptions of the Maoists. While they were seen to be most responsible for creating obstacles in the peace process (30.1%), 30.6% strongly believed they would renounce arms and violence for good and 40.7% had some belief this would be the case.

Most Nepalis expressed concern about the constitution not being written on time. About half blamed the CA members, 35.8% felt it was the government’s fault and 31% said the Maoists were responsible. The most popular course of action was a constitutional amendment to extend the term of the CA (42.6%), followed by CA dissolution and fresh elections (12.7%). Most rejected presidential rule (2.8%) or a return to the 1990 constitution (2.5%). There was almost no support for a new uprising (0.8%).

To resolve the power-sharing deadlock, 24.4% favoured the Maoists leading a new coalition government while a further 20.7% favoured a UML or NC-led unity government including the Maoists. Only 16.4% wanted the Madhav Nepal government to continue, with negligible support for handing over power to the president (or the former king, for that matter).

Respondents appeared to be almost equally divided in assessing the army chief affair of last year that led to the resignation of the Maoist-led government. Although 41.6% professed ignorance, 22.4% felt the president’s move was correct, 19.9% thought the Maoists were right, and 14.8% thought both were wrong. Unsurprisingly, Tarai respondents were more supportive of the president’s move.
To what extent do you believe that the Maoists will permanently give up arms and violence and join the political mainstream?

Nationally, 40.7% believed the Maoists would permanently give up arms, with 26.8% believing they would not. Over half (53.2%) believed the Maoists would eventually give up the political mainstream, with 40.7% believing they would perpetually be against it. On the issue of arms, 61.2% of respondents in the Tarai felt the Maoists would eventually give up arms, while 40.7% believed they would not.

How should the Maoist combatants in the cantonments be managed?

Nearly a third of Nepalis believe the Maoists should be integrated into the army as the best way to manage them, with 25.1% believing this to be the best way. Another 25.1% believe the Maoists should be set up a separate security force. Interestingly, 16.1% of respondents believe the Maoists should be integrated into the national army, while 18.3% believe they should be managed through alternative arrangements.
They will step back

Interview with Shumark Pokhrel, Information Minister and government spokesperson in Dristi, 27 April

How has the government evaluated the activities of the Maoists?
The government has assessed the activities of the Maoists based on reports received from across the country. It has realised itself for what it takes to deal with the challenges.

Do you think Maoist policy is to capture power through a people’s revolt?
This is what they have been saying publicly. The Maoists declare in mass gatherings what the CA is supposed to declare. The declaration of federal states however did not get legality. Since the episode of the army chief, their attempts, they have been bluffing factions. Having failed in all attempts, they have been bluffing with an ultimate revolt to bring down the government from the street and complete the constitution-writing process. They will not succeed in this. The Maoists’ real transformation will begin after this.

What if an agreement is not reached with the Maoists? Are there chances of military mobilisation?
The peace accord has its limitations. There is no possibility to mobilize the army against the Maoists under the existing peace accord. But if their activities cross certain limits, the government can mobilize the army if deemed necessary, anytime it wants. I don’t think they will go as far as to breach the peace accord.

Are the Maoists planning to capture power in the name of May Day?
The Maoists have not said they will capture power just yet. This protest is for civilian supremacy, dissolution of the puppet government, national unity government under Maoist leadership, peace and the constitution. Constitution-writing and the peace process will not be completed under this government. The political parties in power and reactionaries are exaggerating a peaceful protest. They are afraid of people taking to the streets. This will be a show of strength by the Maoists.

Is it going to be a ‘people’s revolt’ or a demonstration on the day?
We will take rallies from major junctures of the city that will converge into a mass gathering in the open air theatre in Tundikhel. Chairman Prachanda will address the gathering. If the puppet government does not step down and allow the Maoists to lead the government, then a program of agitation will be announced from the same place.

What do you say to the remark that industries are being forced to close down and some are even investing abroad due to the labour problem?
This is not true. Those who do not want labour to unite spread rumours.
There is less than a month left to draft the constitution. The political parties are not sure whether the tenure of the CA should be extended or if they can draft the constitution within the given time frame, while the debate persists on fundamental issues. The big three parties are clearly divided: NC and UML want to extend the CA by one year while the Maoists are totally against this. Instead of engaging in a warpath, the constitution-writing process can be brought to a conclusion.

Twenty-three months have passed but contentious constitutional issues remain unresolved. These are unlikely to be resolved in the next month, either. To proceed with the constitution-writing process, the CA should resolve the differences on constitutional issues first and then address other issues. The CA should decide on the forms of the governance, the basis of federalism to address the concerns of different communities, and the integration and rehabilitation of the Maoist combatants in the cantonnements.

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Time is slowly but surely running out for the constitution, but the song remains the same.

Unfortunately, the political parties have not been able to agree on what political system is best for Nepal. Britain and India follow a multiparty parliamentary system with an executive prime minister while America has an executive president. Israel has a directly elected executive prime minister and a ceremonial president. If we do not decide on this issue, constitution-writing cannot move forward.

Federal model is another issue to be resolved. The Interim Constitution proclaimed Nepal a federal republic-state. The political parties also came up with different federal models during the elections, which have changed over time. Now, the entire country is divided on the issue of federalism. Some are in favour of federalism while others have opposed the idea. The fear of communal conflict is getting stronger due to the issue of federalism.

Endorsing a new constitution alone will end the current political chaos. The concerns of the Maoists, parliamentary parties and ethnic communities should be addressed in the new constitution. On 9 November 2009, Janajati CA members torch the draft concept paper on fundamental rights and directive principles in front of the south gate of the CA building, claiming their rights had not been addressed. This might be repeated in the future if grievances are not addressed. But there have not been any studies on the issues that need to be addressed in drafting such a constitution.

The issue of PLA fighters is another big challenge in moving ahead with peace and the constitution-writing process. There has not been any agreement on how and when the PLA fighters will be managed. The political parties have their own interpretations of the peace accord and weapons management, which have already polarised the issue, and even the numbers of combatants to be integrated in various security organisations has not been settled. Without this, neither the constitution nor the peace process can be brought to a conclusion.

We lost our identity by writing ‘Gurung’

Tashi Shyangden Gurungseri
UML CA member, Mustang

In which proposed province are you?
I am in Tamuwan province. The entire Mustang district is in Tamuwan province.

Do you think the identity of the people of Mustang is guaranteed under this draft?
We are not Gurung. We are from the Bahragaun community. Therefore, there should be a ‘Bahragaun autonomous region’.

How can provinces become ethnic in a secular state?
The country should be secular but the provinces should be ethnic.

Don’t you think people of other communities in a province will feel bad if we name provinces after a particular community?
It will definitely hurt them but we cannot help it. The proposed model is yet to be finalised. There should be special provision for minorities in the new constitution. I don’t fully agree with what has been proposed now.

How many are you from your community in the CA?
I am not Gurungseri. I belong to the Bahragaun community. I got the surname Gurungseri while acquiring citizenship. This changed my identity. I feel bad about it. No one from the 5,000 households of our community has ever got any position in politics, government or the bureaucracy so far. I am the only one from my community to become a CA member.

Better late than never

Amol Prasad Upadhyay
NC CA member, Morang 2

Where is the country’s politics heading?
Now is the time to set a new political trend through a new constitution. But the political parties did not act as they should have, which has resulted in the current political deadlock.

Can the CA come up with a constitution in this situation?
Time is running out to resolve the political differences and draft a new constitution. But we should not rush the constitution – it would be wise to find a lasting solution even if it needs two more months.

How do you think things should go if the constitution is not written by 28 May?
It is sad that the constitution-writing deadline will not be met. This was all our fault. It is still the political parties that will have to take responsibility to deal with the situation after May. The political parties have to come up with a constitution anyway.

What prevented political parties from reaching a consensus?
The CA should have been kept away from political prejudices, which unfortunately did not happen. The CA Regulations say that CA members need not obey their party whip in the CA sessions, but this did not happen in practice. We defended our political ideologies even in the CA.

What is your take on federalism?
We have already approved the federal model. We took the decision on federalism thinking of the prosperity that the system might bring. We were not expecting the people to be divided on an ethnic basis. We cannot afford to risk the prosperity of the country under a federal structure by demanding political prerogatives in the provinces drawn along ethnic lines.

The entire country is divided on the issue of federalism. Some are in favour of federalism while others have opposed the idea. The fear of communal conflict is getting stronger due to the issue of federalism.

Endorsing a new constitution alone will end the current political chaos. The concerns of the Maoists, parliamentary parties and ethnic communities should be addressed in the new constitution.
T

he Only in Nepal Absurd

Quote of the Week must be
Deb Gurung explaining
nationally Red Guard exercises
why they were complaining
PKD asked media moghuls this
is guarding like a hawk.
not in the containers that the UN
to know is why those sticks are
350 Sticks”. What the Ass wants
security alert: “Police Confiscate
nation’s finest being on high
Kathmandu daily about the
must be this one from a
week’s funny headline contest
The Second Runner-up to this
have gone up?
the sale of armour-plated Mercs
is good for the economy because
industry in business and is good
is keeping the Bhojpur knife
brandishing it about. After all, it
unduly perturbed about Baddies
buffaloes and no one should be
cultural item used to decapitate
happens. Deb Dai went on to
airport security and see what
Nepal’s national knife through
Right. The man should try taking
khukuri is not a weapon”

Better late than never

Those of us who got a rude
wake-up call last week as cannon
fire rent the air at dawn must be
thinking how many Democracy
Days do we need in this country?
Trouble is we have at least two
words for democracy in Nepali:
Projasthan and Loktantra. And
when we usher in
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