Despite hopes of a breakthrough, the last week saw our politicians entangling themselves further in each other's interests. Even the proposed extension of the Constituent Assembly, the tenure of which is due to expire on 28 May, has not been approved. The fact that such an extension is in the acknowledged interests of majorities within all three major parties (not to mention the nation as a whole), yet still fails to go through, tells us something about the mindset of the players involved.

In short, everyone is jockeying to get into the best position possible. This is nothing new, of course. While all is not lost (and we can expect the Constituent Assembly to be duly extended), this indicates that every step towards the conclusion of the peace process will be fraught with such wrangling and compromises.

The Nepali people are a patient lot. But it's not just the May Dayers and Peace Assemblers of the nation who are running out of patience. In the cantonments, ex-combatants spend their days, as they have every day of the last four years, playing games, patrolling, and idling the time away. It’s testimony to their mental discipline that they appear committed to the change they were taught to believe in. If only their leaders could show us they feel the same.

Over two thousand years ago, the Buddha said, “Everything changes, nothing remains without change.” With a week to go before Buddha Jayanti and the deadline for the constitution, Nepalis have to believe that he was right.
Here we go round in circles again. Like a game of musical chairs, it seems our political players won’t stop until they are left standing. It is a dangerous and dangerous game, but a one-sided one, because we could very easily have a win-win for all sides, and for the country.

If we take a step back from the see-saw of daily headlines that away from ‘Parties Near Agreement’ to ‘Gap Between Parties Widens’ you can see why this is happening. As we noted in this space as far back as May 2006, we had a conflict that neither side won or lost, despite their claims. It was the Nepali people who lost. The country was devastated and the people brutalised.

This is not a peace process anymore. What remains is another round in the power struggle. The Maoists gave up the gun, but not their use of violence and threats. They were forced to put the war into deep freeze because of a military stalemate and geopolitical pressure. In that sense, a section of the Maoist leadership views this ceasefire as it did previous temporary cessations of hostilities: an opportunity to regroup and recharge. They have never wavered from their end goal of dominating a totalitarian people’s republic, employing Gang of Four methods.

For their part, the political parties have also not given up their own end goal of preserving liberal democracy. For parties that believe in non-violence and pluralism, the first priority was to stop the war. Only then could an open society, the rule of law, an independent judiciary and a free market have a hope of surviving.

In this context, it should be fairly easy for the friends of democracy and freedom to decide which side they are on. Yet we see confusion, a romanticisation of violent revolution, and an effort to tolerate and excuse chronic destabilisation, using whatever desperation even by those who should know better.

In hindsight, we could say the democratic parties gave away too much in the peace process. The Maoists pushed us to desperate, but some of those concessions were necessary to keep the Maoists engaged, especially since their negotiators kept threatening to pack up and go back to the jungle every time things did not go their way. These differences were sure to come out sooner or later, as they did when the drafting committees had to tackle the nuts and bolts of the future statute, and are clear to see with the deadline for the constitution approaching.

There are two ways to break this stalemate: go back to war or negotiate in good faith. Since the first option is untenable for the Nepali people and neither side has the stomach to fight, they have to talk. The Maoists are willing to test the boundaries of how far they can go with the threat of a return to war, and that was why they punished the people with an indefinite strike. They still think that a show of might and a hint of violent power will improve their bargaining position.

In the week that is left before 28 May, the first order of business should be to extend the CA, constitute the government and catch up with stuff we should have done last year. It is symbolic that on the eve of the constitution deadline we should be observing Buddha Jayanti.

Don’t kill the CA

Q. How long should the Constituent Assembly be extended for?

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Q. Should PM Mahat K Nepal resign?

Total votes: 4,532

Weekly Internet Poll

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Q. How long should the Constituent Assembly be extended for?

21 - 27 MAY 2010 #503

Don’t kill the CA
The politics over CA extension is based on the assumption that the Maoists are bluffing. They need the CA the most for they lose a legitimate source of strength if it is dissolved. At the last minute, they will – irrespective of whether Madhav Nepal resigns – back the amendment to extend the CA by a year. They may lose face, but they live to fight another day.

This could well be true. The Maoists allow the CA to end, and they will be blamed for being ‘anti-peace and anti-constitution’. They will have to be on the streets even as others continue to enjoy power, despite the diminished legitimacy of each state institution. So the party will be under immense pressure not to play ‘spoiler’. And the risk of a confrontation that will favour the Maoists rises.

In the politburo meeting early this week, there was disappointment at the failure of the strike and questioning of the leadership’s judgment. But another refrain was how the present process was failing to deliver the ‘change’ the Maoists had hoped for and that it was time to consider fresh ideas.

The dogmatists tried to capitalise on the disillusionment and said that the principal contradiction was no longer with the ‘remnants of feudalism’, but with ‘expansionists and its brokers’. Mohan Baidhya (Kiran) and Netra Bikram Chand (Biplab) proposed a new united front with ‘nationalists’ (read royalists and conservatives) against India. This would have been a total reversal of the party line since 2005, and was rejected. The ‘democratic republic’ line prevailed, but it was concluded that unconditional support to the extension would be meaningless, for the fundamental political disagreements would remain. The final decision will now be taken by the central committee that meets from Friday.

But the focus on the Maoists has neglected other layers around the politics of extension.

The ultra-left (and the ultra-right) have a shared interest in seeing the end of the CA with sections of the Indian establishment. Delhi feels that the Maoists are the most vulnerable at the moment, and they should be allowed an extension only if they sign on the dotted line and deliver on commitments. An extension would give them breathing space, and only postpone a crisis. But Indian sources also add they will go along with the general mood of the domestic actors.

Echoes of this, predictably, can be found in the decision of the NC central committee-parliamentary party meeting which made extension conditional on Maoists delivering on issues in the package deal. But leaders like parliamentary party chief Ram Chandan Poudel, who fancies himself as the next PM, supported an unconditional extension. Incumbent NC ministers also went along with the cabinet decision to extend the CA by a year.

For once, Madhav Nepal’s role will be crucial. His role over the past year has been to sit tight, and ensure there is no broad agreement between parties, for he would then lose his job. Some of his aides suggest that Nepal does not want to be in the saddle so he is held responsible for the dissolution of the CA, and is contemplating resigning on May 28 if there is no deal by then. But his conscience is flexible and the temptation to enjoy Baluwatar for some more time could overwhelm it.

One of the most astute observers of Nepali politics has likened all this to the Chakravyuha – a battle formation in the Mahabharata designed by the Kaurava commander, Drona. The Pandava warrior Arjun’s son, Abhimanyu, knew how to break into the ring but not how to leave it. He died while trapped inside.

By locking themselves into difficult positions, Nepali politicians have entered the battle. They hope to have left enough maneuvering space to get out. We will soon find out if they have succeeded.
There is a Michael Jordan in Nepali industry, it may be Panchakanya Group. In the four decades that the company has been in operation, it has grown from a small family-run business to an industrial powerhouse with a brand name that has come to stand for quality and trustworthiness.

Panchakanya’s first significant industrial venture was in 1971, when it introduced modern rice mills to Jhapa. Chairman Prem Bahadur Shrestha and family made the move to take advantage of Nepal’s status, at the time, as a net rice exporter. The family owned property in Jhapa, where land was particularly fertile.

“Our family is from that part of the country, so it made sense to start there. It was very much a local-based operation,” says Managing Director Pradeep Kumar Shrestha (pic. above). The company was named after Panchakanya Temple in Ilam, which is devoted to the five major goddesses of Hindu tradition.

The agro-business proved lucrative, and enabled the group to diversify its trade. It entered the timber industry in the mid-70s, building six saw mills in eastern Nepal. But when the government instituted an anti-deforestation policy, the company found itself in an awkward position. “We had to do something new, but our experience at the time was mainly in timber and local raw materials industry. We thought that we should enter a related sector, so chose construction,” explains Shrestha.

That sparked a phase of vigorous industrialisation. In 1981 the company established Panchakanya Iron Industries, later rechristened Panchakanya Steel, which pioneered the manufacture of earthquake resistant TMT Reinforcement Steel Bars. It based its steel operations in the west in order to help develop that historically poor region.

It began manufacturing PVC and PPR pipes to replace steel and cast iron pipes that left a potentially toxic residue in the water supply, and took over Nepal Bitumen and Barrel Udyog Limited, the only industry in the country to produce bitumen.

And there’s more. Today, the Panchakanya Group manages ten companies and trading houses, which deal in products as diverse as plastic, wires and hydroelectricity, and has investments in the financial and utility sectors, to name a few.

The journey hasn’t been free of challenges. In the early 1970s, there were very few Nepali industrialists, so many didn’t think Panchakanya would get very far. Shrestha recalls, “People would say, ‘Can Nepalis really run a factory?’”. Additionally, the company was up against much more experienced competition, which began a price war in order to throttle the fledgling company. It was then that Panchakanya decided to prioritise quality, even if that meant charging more.

The market response was not satisfactory at first, but improved when Panchakanya Iron Industries became the first industry to win the NS Quality Award in 1998. “Today, we can proudly say that Panchakanya products demand a market premium,” says Shrestha.

Panchakanya Group also sets aside a portion of its profits every year for social causes. It has invested in national level research, campaigns to clean up and improve traffic in major cities, skills development for blue-collar workers, and has sponsored, among others, schools, temples and hospitals nationwide.

In the future, the Group plans to remain committed to the core values of integrity and honesty that have brought it so far, and use that as a platform to help build society. “We’re a mature company now. It’s time we thought in a big way,” says Shrestha.
Online in line

N epal Times was online for almost six months before hitting the needlestand a decade ago. Back then, access to the Internet was limited to Kathmandu Valley. Comments from online readers often bristled with the frustration of homemakers who knew that their views were not being heard. Much has passed, but the tradition of overseas Nepalis complaining about the situation back home is still in the capital. However, it is the emperor of all sites such as ekantipur.com, myrepublica, simple design and eclectic hook a huge following with comments from online readers within the Kathmandu Valley. 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cyber presence lends a cyber presence lends a cyber presence lends a cyber presence lends a cyber presence lends a cyber presence lends a cyber presence lends a cyber publication myrepublica, simple design and eclectic design and streamed pictures of the hard copy. The web is where everyone in the media wants to model of web publications and blogs is yet to evolve. Even a site as lively as mynarsar is finding it difficult to raise money for server costs. Dainikik, too, lost popularity because its promoters could no longer fund the in-depth reporting that once made it famous. At the end of the day, what really encourages repeat visits is not simply attractive design and streamed pictures but hard news and thought-provoking commentary. It’s expensive to collect, collate and package news. Comments continue to be cheap. But good commentary costs money. Since the Internet doesn’t yet offer sustainable returns for journalists, web-only publications don’t attract the best talents around. Citizen’s journalism is all very well, but there is a limit to what amateurs and enthusiasts can provide to satisfy the information, education and entertainment needs of users of web media. Media mogul Rupert Murdoch is said to have observed, “Content is not just king, it is the emperor of all things electronic.” Unsurprisingly, some of his publications – The Times and the Wall Street Journal, for instance – charge for access to their online editions. But in Nepal, where less than one percent of the population has internet access and media houses are just getting their online act together, this will not be an issue for some time to come. Facebook may be all the rage in Kathmandu, but rural Nepal still talks to itself at local chiya pasal, with a little help from the headlines in daily papers.

Net journalism is picking up, but the chiya pasal is still the preferred forum for most Nepalis

about the situation back home is live and kicking (mostly the latter). A critical mass of readers has since evolved that prefers to go online for news. Very few have the time or the inclination to read an entire article, most often clocking the title and pull-quote and scanning the rest of the page before firing off their reactions. The comment sections of web publications are thus often dominated by regular posters shouting at each other in an echo-chamber. The contribution of online readers to issues of national importance is thus minimal. But page views and comments provide some proof to be, even though few can make convincing arguments for it. Given Kantipur’s full-spectrum media dominance, its group site ekantipur is somewhat lame. By comparison, mynarsar has hooked a huge following with simple design and eclectic content. Its sister publication mynarsarha, however, could do with some innovation. When it comes to page views, independent websites and weblogs such as nepaliplus and mynarsar are not far behind media heavyweights such as ekantipur, mynarsarha and mynarsarha. But the revenue
Can Bhutan get it right?

First, the conspicuous absence of advertising billboards or graffiti and second, the high greenery. A walk around the small city of Thimpu, which has a kilometre-long market, takes one back in time. No brands clamour for your attention, be it aerated drinks, instant noodles or designer wear. The little shops sport homogeneous blue and white signboards for the most part, and do not have much variety on offer. The department store concept is yet to be seen, but this is less to do with a lack of consumer demand than government policy: consumerism is seen to ruin society. The Bhutanese talk extensively about Gross National Happiness (GNH) as a counter to market and consumption driven GDP. For instance, mountaineering in Bhutan is not allowed, as it has been deemed that the mountains should be kept as they are. Their conception of measuring people’s happiness as opposed to consumption or production is unique, and is a counter to western measures of prosperity.

While everyone describes Bhutan as a small country, a population of around 800,000 means the country is manageable. The constitution decrees that 60 per cent forest cover is a must, and this has perhaps saved Bhutan from the kind of ‘excavator terrorism’ that has plagued Nepal. The rulers of Bhutan have definitely learnt from Nepal’s failures, and this can be seen in how they have gone about writing a new constitution, begun their experiments with the ballot box, kept donors in check, adopted global calendars and work schedules, and let English co-exist with the national languages.

The challenge for Bhutan is to sustain its efforts. While a small population can allow for Singapore-style governance and control, the opening up of information access will be difficult to stem. How long can the local television channel, which resembles the Nepal Television of the early nineties, compete with international channels? How can one ignore the popularity of the first Miss Bhutan contest and the aspirations of Bhutanese youth that make up half the population? How long can one expect to see this youth in (mandatory) traditional dress, coke in one hand and cell phone in the other? How will the youth challenge those who have been in power for many years in the elections slated for 2013? Does free education and health care mean citizens will take the state for granted, in a country with over 50,000 migrant workers? Will this lead to an Emirates-style economy, where a wealthy state pays for the social security of its citizens while people from different nationalities actually do the work? Only time will tell how these challenges will be addressed.

From an investor’s perspective, Bhutan will become a hot destination. If a firm governance structure and access to energy can be seen as two big advantages, the biggest remains Bhutan’s parity with the Indian Rupee. This rekindles the Beed’s dream of the ‘Rupa’, a common South Asian currency like the Euro. In the meantime, Bhutan will reap the advantage of India’s growth, and no investor can afford to ignore this. www.arthabeed.com
Renewal: a time for change

The restoration of Swayambhu was a renewal of not only the stupa, but ourselves as well.

TSERING GELLEK

Over the past two years, I have worked on the restoration of the physical form of Swayambhu. Here stands one of the world’s most sacred monuments: a source of light and renewal, whose blessings sustain the power of enlightenment. Yet people continue to ask the seemingly simple question: “How old is Swayambhu?” But that is like asking the age of an ancient forest. The process of birth and decay occurs naturally in a forest, providing an ongoing cycle for renewal and growth. The forest itself has no age. Similarly, the historical Swayambhu has experienced many cycles, forming and reforming over the ages. Like the rings of a tree, each renewal of the sacred forms adds another layer of meaning and represents a new expression of faith. The Swayambhu we see now is a culmination of all the Swayambhus that have received offerings from devotees in the past.

Since the early 13th century, 14 major restorations of Swayambhu have been undertaken, roughly one every 50 to 100 years. The last was undertaken by the Tibetan lama Tokden Shakya Shri in 1918. The current renovation of Swayambhu formally commenced on 1 July, 2008. The aim of this renovation was to restore the metal sections of the existing stupa to the splendour achieved by the last renovation. In so doing an opportunity was provided to restore and revitalize many traditional practices and artistic traditions. In this, the renovation was a time of renewal not just for the stupa, but for us as well.

Over 100 artisans and other individuals participated in the renovation, which involved no less than the removal, restoration, re-gilding (with pure gold) and reinstallation of the vajra, the dharmachakra mandala, the nine shrines in the dome, the harmika, torans, cornice, and the thirteen rings. Thanks are due to the vajracharyas, priests, and lamas, the Government of Nepal, and all the ministers and officials who granted permission to carry out this meritorious work and offered their advice and guidance; to all the artisans and workers who have given their skills and energy day after day; and to the Nepali citizens and their associations whose assistance and good wishes have been essential. Responsibility for funding was taken up by the Tibetan Nytrugpa Meditation Center (USA), including for 20 kilos of gold. The Buddha taught that all compounded things are impermanent. This truth reminds us of the inevitable decay and passing of all things. It also offers us a priceless opportunity to reconnect to the sacred site of Swayambhu and ensure that its blessings continue. This moment of completion is also a time for renewal and a time to reflect on the power of change.

The Friends of Swayambhu are holding a peace and unity lamp ceremony on 27 May, 7.30 pm.

FAIREST OF THEM ALL: Mirror puja to remove the ‘essence’ of Swayambhu before renovation work started, 2008

Renovations underway at Swayambhu, 2010

Lion face, during and after restoration
Last Sunday, Korean painter Maija Ruth Lee launched her solo exhibition "Recollections Of The Lonesome Traveller" at Siddhartha Art Gallery in some style. Nepali Times caught up with the young artist.

Where did you get the inspiration for the poetry and paintings?
It all started from the dreams I had. I would write down bits and pieces of whatever I could remember in my journal. The dreams were very graphic, and were naturally very good to draw inspiration from. I had new revelations each time I reviewed these writings.

Why the confessional poetry?
Before, I didn’t really know how to write poems. So I started reading up about it from the works of the masters, such as Sylvia Plath. I felt a kind of connection with her work, and eventually decided such a style would be helpful in conveying my ideas.

Why Nepal?
I’ve always loved this gallery. It’s been here for as long as I can remember. But it also has more to do with the conducive environment here. Unlike in Korea, there is a culture here where people make the effort to appreciate such exhibitions and art. People are just too busy in Korea.

What do you think of the work of Nepali artists?
Nepali artists tend to go for a more abstract level of art, and that’s a pity. Art starts with the history of it, which form the fundamentals of any artist. Abstract art is important too, but dangerous. There have been many works that are repetitive and lack originality. It’s important to know why you’re following a style. Nepali artists need to be more daring and keep making more art.

Himalayan Art revived
UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador Madanjeet Singh’s classic ‘Himalayan Art’, first published in 1968 by Macmillan and UNESCO, is to be reprinted by the South Asia Foundation.

The unique, fascinating artistic heritage of the Himalayan region, the birthplace of two major world religions, is still largely unknown to the layperson. But the snow-covered mountains of the northern Indian subcontinent abound in beautiful religious and mythological treasures.

Until Singh coined the term ‘Himalayan art’ and published his book, there had been no general account of the subject. This was in no small part due to the remoteness of the communities within which this art resided. Singh made it his mission to travel in the most inhospitable conditions by all available means, covering the entire region including Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. He collected hundreds of photographs of manuscripts, sculptures and wall paintings. It was thanks to the popularity of Singh’s acclaimed book that thousands of tourists from all over the world thronged to the relatively ignored Himalayan region not just to conquer its nature, but also to see its culture. Even for Singh, expressly looking to document the region’s art, this was not always obvious. Among the many anecdotes in the book is the revelation that Ladakh’s Alchi monastery was discovered when the jeep Singh was travelling in fell into a trench. As it was being hauled out, Singh chanced upon a little-known shrine and was astonished to discover the hidden relics that today have made the monastery among the best known in the world.

What might have been as surprising to the author was the incredible success of the book. Even Singh found it impossible to get a copy of the book—until he chanced upon a second-hand copy in the bookshop of the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul. Nishchal N. Pandey
Peace and Unity Lamp Ceremony, to mark the successful renovation of the Swayambhu Mahakaliya, Buddha Jayanti, 27 May, 7.30pm, Swayambhu

The recollections of a lonesome traveller, solo exhibition by Korean artist Maia Ruth Lee (interview, page B) depicting the metaphorical identities of a traveller. Her works draw inspiration from dreams and journal entries. Sishantra Art Gallery, Babar Mahal Revisited, 11am-6pm, 11-3 June 2010, 4218048

Paniphot. Gurukul is restaging Khagendra Lamichhane’s Nepali-language play due to popular demand. Runs until 29 May, everyday at 5.30pm except Mondays

Poetry and Motion. Caravan Theatre presents two short plays for families: Doctor Concocter, based on the famous Doctor Doolittle books, and Robyn Crusoe, inspired by the classic novel Robinson Crusoe. Ideal for young audiences, Doctor Doolittle books, and Robyn Crusoe, inspired by the Nepali-language play due to popular demand. May, everyday at 5.30pm except Mondays

Creativity in Business, a discussion of the role of literature in business with Sujeet Shalaya (Beed Management) and Siddhartha Art by Kapil Mani Dixit. Wear red or black to the exhibition

Tribute to Great Artists, improvisations on the works of artists like Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock and Salvador Dalí by Kopil Mani Dixit. Wear red or black to the exhibition

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This week marks the onset of the monsoon as a giant cyclone has dumped rain along much of the Bay of Bengal. Another cyclone, fueled by a westerly jet stream over eastern Tibet, has also moved south and will collide into an advancing front. This may produce heavy rainfall in northeast India and east Nepal. On the other side of the subcontinent, the western arm of the southwest monsoon will bring rain to the hot climatic zones. Nepal’s central and eastern regions will get rain through the weekend but western Nepal may see only passing clouds. An early monsoon is likely.

IN SEARCH OF GOD: A pilgrim looks for the image of the Buddha on a pipal leaf in Lumbini on Wednesday, a week before the birth anniversary of Gautam Buddha.

TAKE CARE: UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator Robert Piper prepares to hand over a cheque for Rs 1 million from the United Nations Women’s Organisation to the Chhetrapati Free Clinic to set up a Mother and Child Care Unit, Sunday.

ON ITS WAY: After a month of being grounded, the Rato Machhindranath chariot is pulled along by devotees on the third day of its journey at Mangal Bajar, Wednesday.

EYES ABROAD: Passport applicants wait outside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the only office issuing passports, after the government failed to meet the deadline for machine readable passports.

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Eyes on the Bay of Bengal...
Flagellating the self-flagellators

Kalim Rabi Thapa

I

n yet another stroke of ortatory genius that he has since had cause to publicly regret, Pushpa Kamal Dahal recently redefined the class war as that between the sukilo-mukilo of Kathmandu (to be seen at peace assemblies) and the mailo-dhailo of the hinterland (to be seen at May Day rallies). His rage at the former’s alleged impudence and the latter’s arrogance is quite understandable. But isn’t everybody? Since when has it been a crime to be sukilo-mukilo when this is what everybody in the country aspires to be, nor least Dahal of the “glistening, bulging” jowls? Is it possible that certain elites, stung by the charge of elitism, feel obliged not only to chastise wholesale their fellow denizens, but also imply they are vigilantes and troublemakers? But then this through threats, beatings and vandalism— to actually use the term ‘vigilante’ in reference to those who dared defy the banda. Peaceful the banda may have seemed for the UN convoys that were waved through, and the minions of human rights observers who were well-received by those on the streets. But it certainly wasn’t for those daily wage labourers who presumed to work, those who attempted to open shop, or members of the press and public who decided to remit of the law—not by holding those operating outside of the law—by holding up their freedom of movement by those on the streets. But it certainly wasn’t for those daily wage labourers who presumed to work, those who attempted to open shop, or members of the press and public who decided to remit of the law—not by holding those operating outside of the law—by holding up their freedom of movement.

Incredible as it may seem, it’s possible to be anti-Maoist and pro-people.

There is only one of the many positions that have come about when everyone treats the Maoists as if they are wild animals. We’ll tolerate it if they growl at us, as long as they don’t bite. It should be merely laughable when Maoist leader Dinanath Sharma claims his right to (violently) enforce peace rallies. He defied the banda were, if not altogether, “peace rallies”. She deliberately figures the fact that comedian Madan Krishna not only noted the presence at the assembly of educated professionals, but also welcomed farmers and workers. Worst of all, Ghale quotes Madan Krishna as saying “You are the respectable, intelligent and law-abiding section of this society. You shape the destinies of simple, ordinary folks. Aren’t you the ones most entitled to have your say!” Either I was deafened by the chorus of peace, or Ghale is indulging in some all too predictable, liberal translation. Unbeknownst, the May Dayers were “the people”, as she notes. But isn’t everybody? Since when has it been a crime to be sukilo-mukilo when this is what everybody in the country aspires to be, nor least Dahal of the “glistening, bulging” jowls? Is it possible that certain elites, stung by the charge of elitism, feel obliged not only to chastise wholesale their fellow denizens, but also imply they are vigilantes and troublemakers? But then this through threats, beatings and vandalism—to actually use the term ‘vigilante’ in reference to those who dared defy the banda. Peaceful the banda may have seemed for the UN convoys that were waved through, and the minions of human rights observers who were well-received by those on the streets. But it certainly wasn’t for those daily wage labourers who presumed to work, those who attempted to open shop, or members of the press and public who decided to remit of the law—not by holding those operating outside of the law—by holding up their freedom of movement by those on the streets. But it certainly wasn’t for those daily wage labourers who presumed to work, those who attempted to open shop, or members of the press and public who decided to remit of the law—not by holding those operating outside of the law—by holding up their freedom of movement.

So what if people chanted against Dahal? If the Maoist chairman can threaten specific segments of society on a regular basis (never mind promising massacres that would have him swimming in blood), then in the interests of peace, the rest of us go to great pains to avoid offending him and his cadre. To listen to some self-flagellators in Kathmandu, you’d think the YCL deserved a medal for not beating to a pulp, on occasion, those who dared to (for the most part non-violently) defy them. And since everyone self-censored and even ‘volunteered’ donations, you’d think extortion didn’t take place. Think again. Everyone knows one-sided broadsides are more exciting, but do they really open up new perspectives or ultimately undermine themselves? It’s possible (and permissible) to be anti-Maoist and pro-people.
Hunger looms

DADELDHURA - “Our lives revolve around rice. We have no other worries. Our sons sweat all their lives in India for rice and their sons will do the same,” says Gorakh Bahadur Malla, 68, of Ganeshpur 9 in Dadeldhura. His words sum up the fate of the majority of people in the food deficit districts of the country.

Malla knows very well his family of eight would go hungry were it not for his two sons, who have been toiling in the Indian sun for the last eight years. His seven ropanies of rocky land can hardly feed the family for more than three months a year. Other families in the village fare no better. Almost all have at least one of their male family members working in India.

In village parlance, now is the time between the first peach blossoms until the trees give fruit, when they pray no one comes to their homes as guests.

It is not that people go entirely without food. People will say they haven’t had food for days. Upon closer questioning it emerges that they have different ideas about what constitutes food. “Of course I didn’t eat any food for days. I ate millet bread,” says Junkiri BK, 60. But food is scarce and for the people here, not having rice as a staple is just the same as going hungry. Millet is what they call a ‘low food’, and its cultivation has gone down by half. “How can we eat millet for food, we are Thakuris, what will people say?” asks Gershik.

As the days pass, even millet bread is hard to come by. But people will not admit to eating yam and gruel because that is even worse. Thirty Dalit households here do not have a square foot of land in their possession other than what’s taken up by their tiny homes. Since they do not have land to cultivate and rely on wage labour in the homes of upper castes for food, they are the most affected by food shortages.

There are also no irrigation facilities in the village, all farming is rain fed, and improved seed and farming techniques are unheard of. People farm the same way their forefathers did hundreds of years back, and are ill-equipped to deal with the prolonged droughts and frequent natural disasters that have bedeviled the region and contributed to low agricultural production.

Dadeldhura is one of 30 districts that receive food assistance from the government, with 11 of its VDCs classified as food insecure. There is no doubt that without subsidised food, many families in even worse-off districts like Bajura would not make it. But how long do government and donor agencies plan on tackling the problem through short-term relief?

Where are the complementary programs to increase agricultural produce by constructing irrigation canals, to promote use of fertilisers and improved and drought resistant seed varieties, and increase farmers’ access to the market? Where are the programs to promote the cultivation and consumption of locally suitable crops?

All our government seems to be concerned about is finding funds for food supply and this, too, is problematic. Food supply to 22 districts in the mid and far western region was halted a month ago owing to a funding shortfall for transportation. So food has been sitting in government warehouses. Ram Chandra Bhutta, Technical Assistant at the District Agricultural Office, Dadeldhura, says that there will be a food deficit of 15,000 metric tonnes in the district this year.

Time is running out. By monsoon, most of the fields will be impassable and food will have to be transported by air. The expense will be far greater than the Rs. 200 million the Ministry of Commerce and Supplies is demanding now. But those lobbying for hefty supply commissions may have a better idea why the budget isn’t being passed before the rains arrive.

Inevitably, more young men will have to travel to India in search of work while their fields lie barren back home. Their families will be forced to purchase rice on credit from unscrupulous dealers. No doubt, rice is a lucrative business for everyone concerned – except for those who most need it.
Buddhland

It’s more circle of life than tourist circuit for the locals of Lumbini

RUPANDEH – It was hard not to think of Siddhartha Gautam’s first walk outside his father’s palace in Kapilbastu as a passenger on our bus journey to Lumbini howled in grief. Her young daughter had passed away that morning.

But suffering is as real for the people of Lumbini now as it was two millennia ago. Despite the area receiving nearly 780,000 domestic and international tourists each year, according to the Lumbini Development Trust, the locals at the periphery of the top cultural destination of the Tani remain mired in poverty.

Lumbini, the birthplace of Gautam Buddha, is a study in contrasts. Inside the three-mile by one-mile compound are a cluster of newly built monasteries ranging in style from Thai wats to one-mile compound are a cluster of newly built monasteries ranging in style from Thai wats to a museum holds artifacts depicting life in the Shakya kingdom.

The Ashoka Pillar bears the first epigraphic evidence mentioning the foundation of the original temple dating back to the third century BC. Mayadevi Temple, restored and reopened in 2003, contains the birthplace of the Buddha. Tilaurakot is the ancient capital of Kapilbastu, and a museum holds artifacts depicting life in the Shaky kingdom.

The Lumbini Development Trust is in charge of implementing architect Tange’s master plan and runs a few promotional campaigns. In order to celebrate Buddha Jayanti, which falls on 27 May this year, it is holding a debate competition among local students. It also hopes to honour senior monks and lamas in Lumbini but that will depend on the president’s schedule.

Buddhists might tell you Tange’s plan for Lumbini and other promotional campaigns will do little reduce the suffering of human life. If successful, however, such campaigns to attract tourists would certainly ease this suffering for the people of Lumbini.

How to get there: A number of commercial airlines fly daily to Bhairahawa airport. You can take a cab to Lumbini at a cost of about Rs 700, and buses leave every 15 minutes. An information brochure provided by the Lumbini Development Trust says bullock carts are also available, if you so fancy.

What to see: Mayadevi Temple, restored and reopened in 2003, contains the foundation of the original temple dating back to the third century BC. The Ashoka Pillar bears the first epigraphic evidence mentioning the birthplace of the Buddha. Tilaurakot is the ancient capital of Kapilbastu and a museum holds artifacts depicting life in the Shaky kingdom.

When to go: Best to avoid the summer heat.

Where to stay: There are a couple of high-end and many budget lodging options in Lumbini, as well as in Bhairahawa. Monasteries in Lumbini offer accommodation for a donation, including meals.
International interference

Deepak Gajurel in Rajdhani
19 May

Foreign interference in Nepal politics is on the rise. Recently, China, India, America and even the EU have openly shown they are concerned about Nepal politics.

China feels intimidated by the unrest in Nepal as it knows Nepal's geopolitical position might be used against her. China's current political deadlock, was his recommendation. His other suggestion has been disgusted. There was a restaurant on the ground floor, where teenagers were seen with clients. This is not tolerable for anyone.

One of the participants in this interaction program rightly pointed out, we will take action against those owners rather than workers from now on. We will take action against them under the Anti-Trafficking Act 2008.

Cultural shows are good as long as they are decent. But you cannot make teenage girls dance naked to make money. The law does not permit anything for the sake of making money.

I keep my mobile on round the clock, please call and inform me about such activities. I will take action against the owners and managers, not the workers.

I will take care of them.

If you do not inform the police, it will seem as though you are harbouring criminals in your establishment. If you really want to avoid possible trouble in the future, please tell me what you know. Dial 100 for police control or you can call me on my mobile at 9815078100. Together we can build a crime-free society.

Bikash Karki

The Program to Promote Demand for Good Governance in Nepal – PROD will give up jockeying for influence in Nepal.

In the strategic document 'Vision 2020', the US has clearly said Asia will be a major interest in the years to come. Washington has shown interest in the years to come. Delhi duly objected. The recent events in Nepal have demonstrated that India should play a role in mediating in Kashmir. Delhi has already lost influence in the region and it should accept this fact. Barack Obama, during his Beijing visit, said that China should play a role in the regulation to shut down businesses at 11pm. We don't have any other rules regarding this sector, so we should work together to address this issue to make it manageable and decent profession. But for this, we need both political leaders and police to be honest.

If Nepal Police fails to take notice of the corrupt activities of police personnel, as a department head I will take action against them. Tell me if some entrepreneurs are operating unlawfully, I will not spare them.

Did you take note of the last police raid in Thamel? You must have been disgusted. There was a restaurant on the ground floor, a guesthouse on the first floor and a brothel on the upper floor, where teenagers were seen with clients. This is not tolerable for anyone.

Like one of the participants in this interaction program rightly pointed out, we will take action against those owners rather than workers from now on. We will take action against them under the Anti-Trafficking Act 2008.

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This is an abridged version of Kharel's speech at an interaction with dance club operators.
The PLA speaks

Ex-combatants in Shaktikhor are getting restless, but remain committed to their cause

SHAKTIKHOR, CHITWAN - The future of the nearly 20,000 Maoist ex-combatants in seven cantonments across the country has long been a sticking point in the peace process, now more than ever. The Technical Committee has worked out rehabilitation packages, including an option to join politics with cash support, vocational training for self-employment, business loans and education. But as the politicians continue to argue over numbers and modalities, Maoist Chairman Prachanda Dahal has refused to be pinned down, claiming that those in the cantonments have to be consulted. What does the People’s Liberation Army think? What do the real stakeholders of integration and rehabilitation want?

“We can’t understand why the political parties are fighting with each other in the name of the number to be integrated,” says Janak Bahadur Bista (Kuber), the secretary of the Maoist cantonment in Shaktikhor, Chitwan. He suggests the politicians sit together to find a consensus. He is clear on how to proceed. “Open up the options, then individuals can choose freely as per their needs, interests and physical condition,” Bista argues. “How can you prescribe without diagnosis?” He feels that the number of ex-combatants to be integrated into the national security forces depends on the other options that are available. “If a number in the thousands is fixed for integration and only 100 want integration, what happens then? Shall we fulfill the predetermined quota by opening new recruitment into the PLA?”

The other political parties are concerned that if the number isn’t fixed beforehand, the majority of ex-combatants will want to join the security forces. Bista, who himself was seriously injured during the conflict (he still has an iron fragment in his mouth because of an explosion), waves this away firmly. “No, seventy-five per cent of us were physically wounded and many don’t want to serve as security personnel.” He adds, “There are also a number of mothers with four to five kids who dream of having a normal life outside of the armed forces.”

According to Bista, integration and rehabilitation is secondary to the dignity of ex-combatants. “We fought to move this nation forward. If there is a political agreement that addresses our aspirations then we can leave the camps without a paisa. We’re not goods to be sold.” Bista takes issue with the term ‘social rehabilitation’ which implies, he says, that they are jungli (wild).

Surya Bahadur Khadka (Apil), an ex-combatant with a chronic physical disability, is also opposed to fixing the number of combatants for integration. Supported by his crutches, he insists that he should also have the right to join the Nepal Army. “Fixing the number to be integrated may prevent my joining the Nepal Army. That’s unjust since there are many soldiers serving in the Nepal Army who were disabled during the war. I’m just like them. If I have to separated for rehabilitation, why not discharge them too?”

The issue of justice is clearly one that resonates with ex-combatants. Udaya Chaulaune (Dipak), the Vice Commander in Shaktikhor, says that a common agreement on a progressive political transition would sit well with the ex-combatants. For Chaulaune, this means a guarantee of a new constitution with powerful provisions for the rights of poor and marginalised people. “Our fight ends when the losers of the current system can get something from the upper classes, who oppressed them so much in the past,” he says.

It’s not surprising that many in Shaktikhor express political views similar to those of the Maoist leaders currently negotiating their futures. Shanta Pokhrel (Arma) is the Health Battalion in-charge and feels her future is attached to that of all the oppressed people in the country. She says, “I’m not worried at all for myself as we want gender and class liberty first. So there won’t be any blocks once we get rid of the political deadlock.” Aruna and her husband, Jyoti Ashish, are waiting along with their five-year-old son Ujwal for such a political settlement. But she is offended that there have been “excessive exercises to break the unity of the PLA”, which she terms “unacceptable”.

But as they wait for the deadlock to end, it’s clear patience is at a premium. Bista conceded that the ex-combatants didn’t expect to stay in the camp for years, with an uncertain future ahead of them. “We thought we’d be here until the Constituent Assembly elections,” he says. “Some people must be just waiting for us to get tired and depressed.”

Camp scenes confirm his assertion that it’s “boring”. At noon on Monday, ex-combatants kept themselves busy with carrom, chess, ludo, volleyball, football, TV, radio, and simply sitting under trees, taking turns to patrol every two hours. According to official PLA records, Shaktikhor and its three satellite camps are shelter to 3935 ex-combatants.

However, anticipation is still alive in the young ex-combatants. Namkanta Acharya (Bhajan), who as health department chief runs the hospital inside the cantonment, says they are waiting for consensus, but that they are willing to be flexible if their guardian party, the UCPN-Maoist, reaches an agreement. Toting the party line is probably what is keeping the ex-combatants cool in the summer heat of Chitwan, or their mounting impatience may have boiled over a long time ago.
The talk of the town this week was the Primordial Minister lashing out at the Europeans and telling them to Foxtrot Oscar. In his interview with FT, MKN revealed a snarling, hissing side of himself no one knew existed. The question on everyone’s lips is how come the Right Honourable Makunay (never known for his intestinal fortitude when it comes to decisiveness) has suddenly got a second wind?

There are worse places on Earth than KTM, believe it or not. Mogadishu, for instance, where they go ‘dishu...dishu’ on the streets day and night. Or Eastern Congo, where loony gun-toters need Nepali troops to stop them massacring each other. What’s even more uncanny is how the rest of the world follows our footsteps:

> Parts of Pakistan now have ten hours of load-shedding per day and they have added the element of surprise cuz you don’t know when the lights go off.
> A Bolivian indigenous group that wants more autonomy for its resource-rich ethnically demarcated federal province has decided to announce an indefinite nationwide band. Tell me they didn’t get that from us.
> Both Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales are sounding more and more like Chairman Superfluous when they threaten media critics with dire unspoken consequences.
> Britain is aping our coalition politics, and this could mean Westminster will start resembling BICC one of these days.
> Also in the UK, police have banned 500 Euro notes because (same reason we used to ban 500 and 1,000 Injun roops in Nepal) they found that 90 per cent of high denomination Euros were used by the underworld.
> And who would have thought the Thais of all people would begin to follow our path towards urban chaos and republicanism? So, ahiz well.

The late Girija Babu, before he started seeing Baddies as allies in the last year of his life, is remembered for having famously said that Maoists and Monarchists were one and the same. The trickle of Mandalays defecting to the Maobaddies is now becoming an exodus. Royalists and hindoo fundos have suddenly started accusing kingG of losing his nerves and crossing the floor to join hands with godless commies. Padam Dai, Tankababu have gone over and Loktantra Man has offered his home as a safehouse. And from the way Kamal Thapa is dishing it out on Mau Mau TV, it may only be a question of time before saffron meets red.

While the Prachanda vs Baburam duet plays in the background, there are some comrades who are quietly projecting themselves as reasonable folks who can be trusted. Comrade Cloudy endues the brooding confidence of a man who seems to have it all under control. Mahara Kamred has a couple of trump cards up his sleeves. Comrade CPJ has gone a step further and hinted that maybe neither PKD nor BRB should be PM right now. CPJ was in pretty confessional mode when he admitted to the party having been swindled by the folks at Unity Life. So it takes a pyramid scheme to bring out the greed in the baddies, and even extortionists can be extorted.

But let it be known that the president, prime minister, various coalition ministers and secretaries have also graced various launchings organised by Unity’s mastermind Kashi Prasad.

The bush telegraph is throbbing as May 28 nears with news that Jhusil Koiralo went to meet El Capital at the Pistachio Palace the other day for a meeting that not even aides were let into. Then Comrades KPO and BRB burned up their hotline to come up with a solution. So, what’s it going to be: an NC-led govt in which the baddies have a berth?

Meanwhile, there is a roaring ongoing honeymoon between Cash Kumar Juicy and Comrade Awesome. FNCCI seems to have decided that if you can’t fight ‘em, join ‘em and has started behaving like a political party. Juicy and Ferocious have been having lunches and dinners together to plan a mass rally at the behest of the baddies.

Awful has ended up saying sorry to just about everyone he abused in his Munch speech, but not yet to the media. In that why his cadre in the districts haven’t stopped threatening and intimidating journos they think are too independent?