Two months since UML Chairman Jhala Nath Khanal managed to manoeuvre himself to power with a little help from his friends in the Maoist party, his government has not even achieved the bare minimum of settling on a full complement of ministers for his cabinet.

One of the ministers he has nominated, Bharat Mohan Adhikari, has already rocked the boat by prompting the resignation of the widely admired Finance Secretary Rameshwor Khanal.

At the rate the prime minister is going, the process of forming a government may not even be completed by 28 May, when the Constituent Assembly is due to expire. With his enemies within and outside of UML quite happy to see him fail, and the party from which his government derives its chief legitimacy distracted by the much-hyped prospect of a vertical split, Khanal will have to conduct some serious outreach if his tenure is to be seen as more than the lucky aftermath of a slap in the face.

Prime Minister Jhala Nath Khanal faces the media following a program organised on the 56th anniversary of the Federation of Nepali Journalists, Wednesday.
UNTIED WORKERS

Editorial, #546)

Q. Do you think UCPN (Maoist) will split?
A. (Yes) 86%, (No) 9%, (Don’t know) 5%

Weekly Internet Poll # 547

In the short term, the aforementioned stakeholders will probably fancy their chances with a Maoist split, in as much as the Maoist party will be weakened. In the medium term, a split would do nothing for the peace process and the constitution.

TIGER, TIGER
Stories like these make my day (‘Cross-country tiger’, Min Ratna Bajrayacharya, #546). Well done to all the staff involved.

Raghu

In the long term, a split, and the inevitable exclusion of the radicals, could fuel the basis for yet another damaging conflict. Be careful what you wish for.

CUNNING PLAN

“With the dissolution of the seemingly irreconcilable three-way split in the highest echelons of the Maoist party, it has become possible for the Maoist party to concentrate on internal manipulation, ideological schisms, egoism, and internal manipulation, the driving forces – external manipulation from falling apart. Whatever happens, the Maoist party was simply a reflection of the seemingly irreconcilable three-way split in the highest echelons of the Maoist party. What is happening is that Maoist supporters, the cadre, have already chosen sides. Those who wish to see the Maoists split will reluctantly pursue that course, just as the cadres in the Maoist party have already decided on that course.

However, the sensible thing for the government to do is to make a clear statement of facts, and clear all doubts. They must admit that given compulsions that they are too embarrassed to talk about, they could not complete the entire process and, therefore, they have a cunning plan which would help them sort out the issues.

The cunning plan would involve the following with the first point most preferred:

1) Conduct fresh elections for the CA, or by-elections. While this editorial suggests this, and provide a pre-set timeline that must be followed. If any of the deadlines are missed then the government (or someone) would immediately resign or undergo some other sort of penalty. Raising the stakes in this manner will ensure everybody that the government is serious about what they are saying.

Averting the looming element about the change in Nepal is that most people don’t really understand what change is likely to happen in this country. Nobody has answered the question, what after the constitution? Various upset and jubilant about the disruptive changes in the form of the abolition of the constitutional monarchy and the establishment of secularism, as well as the threats and opportunities likely to emerge from federalism, Nepal’s elites have failed to inform the ordinary citizens that there are not really the changes, but structural adjustment required for the real changes.

LOSING MY HEAD

I have, in a safety locker in my old house in Dadeldhura, some 2 lathi Nepal rupee notes. All crisp. All with the grumpy face of Gyanendra (‘Off with the heads...nah’, Paawan Mathema, #546). I live in Timbaktu, Africa. And I have the only keys to the locker with me. Obviously, I’m too paranoid to trust my relatives with the keys. If the intelligent people at Rastra Bank again decide to declare those currency notes illegal, should I buy a plane ticket to Nepal to turn them in?

Thurupnich

WHERE’S SECURITY?

...address Madhesi issues, and not act against India’s security interests” (‘Off with the heads...nah’, Paawan Mathema, #546). I live in Timbaktu, Africa. And I have the only keys to the locker with me. Obviously, I’m too paranoid to trust my relatives with the keys. If the intelligent people at Rastra Bank again decide to declare those currency notes illegal, should I buy a plane ticket to Nepal to turn them in?

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GO WEST

The beautiful Aji, Mahakali, Soti River, the forests, and the beautiful cities: Baitadi, Dadeldhura, Doli, Chinpuri, Martad, Kalkoit, Sanjhe and many others have long been there (‘Fabulous far west’, Dambir Krishna Shrestha, #546). So have the wildlife sanctuaries. The climate allows all kinds of crops, vegetables, fruits and herbs from the northernmost Himalas to the flat Tarai, which also has great fishery production potential. Educated far western folks and their political leaders live in KTM. The rest? We all go to India and bring back HIV/AIDS. The donors and the NGOs and government officials run their projects through Nepali government. Unit offices with AC, vehicles and easier flights to KTM or trips to Lucknow or Delhi or Hardwar. As a result, Indians of all skill levels come to work and do business, make money and take it back to India; many villages have women with HIV/AIDS, the potential remains unused; and Karnali blues and plays are only to read or see in KTM for fun and sympathy amongst selected groups of fans including writers and the media.

In the early 80s, in a response to a question by a group of donor agency staff on what I believed the development trend should be for the far western region, my response to them was just help build roads, roads and roads. Nepal people will do rest. I still believe it. Don’t you?

U. Upadhyay

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ON THE WEB
times

What does the dissolution of the three parallel Maoist trade unions mean? It means that those who have been indulged in by of those who do wish to see the Maoists split. That UCPN (Maoist) derives from the ferment of debate, and that UCPN (Maoist) diehard supporters, the cadre, have already chosen sides. Those who wish to see the Maoists split will reluctantly pursue that course, just as the cadres in the Maoist party have already decided on that course.

The government is serious about what they are saying.

Averting the looming element about the change in Nepal is that most people don’t really understand what change is likely to happen in this country. Nobody has answered the question, what after the constitution? Various upset and jubilant about the disruptive changes in the form of the abolition of the constitutional monarchy and the establishment of secularism, as well as the threats and opportunities likely to emerge from federalism, Nepal’s elites have failed to inform the ordinary citizens that these are not really the changes, but structural adjustment required for the real changes.

It’s hardly a surprise either. After all, parties from the full range of Nepal’s political spectrum have and will continue to endure splits based purely on a lust for power and praise. The Maoists have the added complication of ideology. You can’t sit on the sharp fence of revolution for very long without being accused of being an extremist or a reactionary. But we should worry about the consequences. Many will rub their hands in glee at the prospect of a Maoists split even if they only continue to stumble along in strife, for there is no doubt that they are not doing themselves or their support base a favour. The rest of the political establishment and India are obvious candidates for schadenfreude, but a fair sector of the media, the business community, and the rest of the Kathmandu elite would like no better than to see the fragmentation of the Maoist party fragmented.

But is Nepal better off with a minimalist Maoist party that is reluctant to reform, but which at least makes some effort to engage with the rest of the establishment, and which still represents one half of a peace process that it has not quite abandoned? Or do we want a split that, no one be in any doubt, would be far more significant than previous splinters, and which could leave us with or two or three still large and powerful parties? At least one of these parties will then resort to unbridled radicalism to claim the revolutionary mantle.

In the short term, the aforementioned stakeholders will probably fancy their chances with a Maoist split, in as much as the Maoist party will be weakened. In the medium term, a split would do nothing for the peace process and the constitution.

In the long term, a split, and the inevitable exclusion of the radicals, could fuel the basis for yet another damaging conflict. Be careful what you wish for.

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In the long term, a split, and the inevitable exclusion of the radicals, could fuel the basis for yet another damaging conflict. Be careful what you wish for.
As finance secretary Rameshwor Khanal resigns after standing up to political pressure, it is an appropriate moment to look back more than three decades ago, when another secretary preferred to defend his principles and walked out of government service. Devendra Raj Panday's decision then, as a mark of opposition to the Panchayat system, was an even bolder one since the regime then did not take too kindly to dissent. Few have done as much since to push the boundaries of social democracy, ignite debates on meaningful development, champion human rights, and argue for integrity in public life as Panday. What makes his life and work even more striking is that a man who was born to a privileged and traditional Bahun family, and had close links with the palace, went beyond his class and caste interests and sought to understand Nepal in all its complexity and diversity.

After quitting government service, Panday slowly became involved in the struggle for democracy. He publicly criticised Panchayat development strategies; built close links with NC leaders who often asked him for assistance; expanded links with professionals yearning for an open society; and built networks with the emerging community of human rights activists. All this was to play an important role in 1990, when Panday became the de facto civil society leader for the movement for democracy.

In recognition of his role, and the respect in which he was held by all the political forces, interim PM Krishna Prasad Bhattarai appointed him finance minister. Panday was frustrated by his limited brief to ‘keep the economy on track’. He often recounts how he could not push welfare measures as the PM wanted the focus to remain on constitution writing and holding the elections, and sought to avoid any complications. As the 1990s progressed, Panday became increasingly disillusioned. He felt there was little attempt to reconceptualise development from a democratic perspective, and the new governments had adopted core elements of the Panchayat development strategy. Except for the new rulers and the rank and file of the newly legalised political parties, democracy did not bring about a transformation in the lives of Nepalis. There was no distributive justice, leading to increased inequality. State structure remained exclusionary; inter and intra-party rifts had distorted democracy; politicisation of civil services became entrenched; the armed conflict was taking its toll on people.

Incorporating many of these concerns, Panday produced ‘Failed Development’. He also mounted a stringent criticism of the international aid industry in Nepal, highlighting its failure to aid productive sectors that could generate lasting economic growth and allow a sustainable welfare state. He pointed out that while foreign aid had led to awareness among marginalised groups and enabled them to articulate their demands, it also helped sustain traditional power structures, protecting them from having to adapt to the new consciousness.

Panday flirted for a short while with direct politics in the 1990s, setting up his own party. But his primary role was in civil society, battling corruption and fighting for human rights, including at the regional level. As the conflict deepened, he felt he had a responsibility to find a solution. He was the first civil society leader to meet Pushpa Kamal Dahal in the early years of the last decade, and he had a simple message for the Maoist supremo – “Give up violence, and enter open politics. The entire left and social democratic space is vacant, and you will be successful.”

As the palace began actively intervening in politics, Panday made the transition from a constitutional monarchist to a republican. The Citizens Movement for Democracy and Peace (CMDP) in 2005-06, which he led, was the game changer in the fight against the royal autocracy by mobilising the masses and urging them to have faith in the political parties, which had made such a mess of the 1990s. He was also an active behind-the-scenes player in preparing the ground for the broader Maoist-parties accord.

Since 2006, even as other civil society stalwarts have gone around lobbying to become MPs or obtain certain posts, Panday has rejected all that has come his way, including CA membership. Instead of personal gain, he has kept his focus on the bigger picture. At the cost of being called a Maoist, a ludicrous label for a committed democrat and human rights activist, Panday has consistently argued for continued collaboration between the parties and the Maoists in the spirit of the 12-point agreement; stood for inclusion, federalism, a new political culture and radical social welfare measures; spoken out against violence; and opposed all constitutional violations.

Thirty years after Panday left government service, it is beyond doubt that the establishment’s loss was a tremendous gain for Nepali democracy.
“Qatar values Nepal”

When a destination is important, an airline does at least a flight a day,” says Ramdas Shivram, Qatar Airways’ country manager for Nepal. “We operate three flights daily from Kathmandu, so you can tell how Qatar Airways values Nepal.”

Shivram recently joined the Nepal team and is positive about the airline’s future here. With Doha growing as a transit hub for travellers across the globe, the airline has been able to expand its Kathmandu flights to 21 a week, despite competition from other Middle Eastern airlines. The airline was ranked the third best in the world in the annual 2010 Skytrax passenger survey.

“Migrant labourers form part of our clientele but the airline has a good proportion of business and leisure travellers as well,” says Shivram. This fiscal year, Qatar Airways serviced about 80,000 passengers, and a majority of them had two-way tickets.

Qatar Airways intends to contribute actively to Nepal Tourism Year 2011, and has set a target of 100,000 passengers. It has been working with Nepal Tourism Board to promote Nepal abroad and is also a sponsor for the Board’s activities. Qatar, with other airlines, has been pushing for a 24-hour Tribhuvan International Airport. “There have been improvements in the airport, but a lot can be still done,” says Shivram. He suggests upgrading the technology used in the airport and speeding up response.

In April, Qatar Airways celebrates its 100th destination, Aleppo. In a span of 13 years, its fleet has grown to 96 aircraft, up from just 4. Shivram says: “Qatar has been expanding internationally, and we continue to explore ways to grow in Nepal as well. We will soon fly four flights daily from Kathmandu.”
In 1979, then Finance Secretary Devendra Raj Panday resigned from his post after a dispute with Prime Minister and Finance Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa. Last Tuesday, Rameswor Khanal, Finance Secretary, allegedly tendered his resignation following a major disagreement with Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Bharat Mohan Adhikari. Between the two incidents lies a short history of Nepal’s administrative service.

Nepal first drafted a Civil Service Act in 1957. By 1990, the act had gone through 29 revisions. Revisions were not meant to institutionalise the civil service, but to expand the discretionary power of top-level bureaucrats, ministers and the masters of them all, the Palace mandarins. During the Panchayat years frequent changes in the Act helped the Palace decide who was in and who was out among the ministers and, sometimes, among the bureaucrats. It was with the Palace’s blessing that Thapa decided that Panday should be out, and out went Panday. Administrative procedure be damned!

Upon donors’ advice, CP Koirala’s government started the process of streamlining the bureaucracy in 1992. But as so often happens with technocratic advice applied without an understanding of the local context and capacity, the streamlining work soon mutated into an ill-thought out exercise. Laid-off civil servants sued the government, won their cases, and eventually returned to their jobs. Besides, the idea of creating a lean bureaucracy did not go well with political parties, who saw government as a painless source of many low to mid-level jobs for their cadres at the expense of taxpayers and donors.

With the stage set thus, the following 15 years saw party-political influence penetrating deep into the fibre of the civil service. Secretaries who agreed to help siphon funds to party headquarters or the pockets of politicians were tolerated and promoted. Those who did not cooperate were sidelined. Career paths for bureaucrats became unstable and unpredictable. For patronage, they started becoming fixtures at party headquarters and at politicians’ homes. Trade unions with overt political affiliations started signing up civil servants as members, treating them as though they were wage labourers.

By the time of Jana Andolan II in 2006, the mood at government offices had become politically electric and polarised. In some way, that helped contribute to the protest movement against the king.

But the cost was that the virus of partisan politics became firmly entrenched in the fabric of the civil service. In the last two years, with stories of ministers assaulting civil servants and locking them up in bathrooms, Nepal’s ‘civil service’ has become neither civil nor service-oriented. Years of political interference by democratically elected netas who outdid the Panchayat mandarins in weakening all potentially strong and independent institutions have meant that the civil service is now an ‘anything goes’ institution. As such, even if one were to start civil service reforms tomorrow, pushing the reforms through the system to make it independent and strong is not an easy task.

Rameswor Khanal’s resignation is a protest against the pernicious influence of politics on the civil service, but don’t expect anything to change.

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Rameswor Khanal’s resignation is a protest against the pernicious influence of politics on the civil service, but don’t expect anything to change.
I n the Bollywood movie Hyderabad Blues, two pairs of brides and grooms are about to tie the knot. At the last moment, one of the brides ditches her groom to be with her true love, who himself is on the verge of marrying another woman. Nepal’s situation is not so different. The Maoists and UML have been in a relationship since the seven-point deal between their party chairmen, which paved the way for UML’s Jhala Nath Khanal to become PM. Nepali Congress, for all its recent bungling, still has at least two aces up its sleeve. For a truly effective coalition would be one between the Maoists and Nepali Congress, with UML and the Madhesi parties playing a supporting role. Ego, pigheadedness and the personal ambitions of their leaders, along with a heavy dose of suspicion about each other’s intentions, have however pushed the Maoists and Nepali Congress further apart. Neither the peace process nor the coalition will see the light unless these two come together.

The reasons, if they needed any reinforcement, are obvious. It has taken less than two months for the parties to realise – they are loath to admit it in public, though – what a mess they have created. Khanal’s is already a non-functioning government, and not just for his failure to give full shape to his cabinet even two months since he took over as the top executive of the country.

This is an unnatural coalition, even though it is heavily communist in character, with the country’s two leading communist parties and an ex-communist led Madhesi party being part of it. President Yadav has pointed out that decisions by the coalition (which as a two-thirds majority in the CA) will have no meaning if such decisions don’t have the political backing of all the major political forces. More than the numerical two-thirds, President Yadav said, a political two-thirds majority is the need of the hour. One may accuse him of overstepping his constitutional brief, but beneath the plastered news of a PM said to be “unhappy” about the president’s statement, there is a much-needed nudge to reverse the slide downhill.

The whole idea about acting as per the mandate of the people expressed through their ballots, and embracing the reality of post-conflict transition, was always pointing to one direction – a government led by the Maoist party and to be more specific, Pushpa Kamal Dahal. The chairman can say all he wants, shout himself hoarse over India’s meddling in internal politics (not unjustified, as recent events corroborate his allegations), and issue threats. But he and his party cannot afford to ignore Nepali Congress. He needs to speak to those in the party with whom he first got in touch to effect the 12-point agreement, agreed to implement the agreements on integration/rehabilitation of Maoist combatants, and agree on constitution-drafting. In return, Nepali Congress must unequivocally say it is the Maoist party that should lead the government. Nepali Congress’ sideling in national politics notwithstanding, the Maoists would do well to take it three steps at a time: that Nepali Congress will not allow the promulgation of the constitution unless the Maoists honour their commitment on ex-combatants. It is right in asserting that there cannot, and should not, be another election with the Maoist party still effectively commanding the reins of a private army. If Dahal- Khanal refuse to listen and try to go ahead as per their seven-point deal, it will lead to what no democrat in the country wants to see happen: the dismantling of the Nepali government by the president Yadav around 28 May with the covert backing of Nepali Congress and other political parties, including a powerful faction of UML.

The Nepali Congress threat is an empty one. They know that the president is ready to act out his role as protector of the constitution with the army standing firmly behind him. May better sense prevail.

damakant@gmail.com

This week

CIAA officials charged

The Supreme Court has recommended action against former acting chief commissioner of the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA), Lal Bahadur Limbu, and commissioner Babu Prakash Siwakoti. The court has accused them of abusing their authority to register public land used by the UN Park in Kathmandu in an individual’s name. This is the first incident in which action is being taken against officials of an anti-graft body. The court has also ordered former minister and NC leader Khum Bahadur Khadka to appear within 15 days to defend himself against charges of corruption. He has been accused of embezzling Rs 23.6 million and abusing his powers as a minister at different ministries post-1990. Khadka was cleared by the Special Court in 2006.

Finance secretary resigns

Finance Secretary Ramawar Khanal tendered his resignation citing differences with Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Bharat Mohan Adhikari on Tuesday. Khanal had been pushing for action against fake VAT receipt issuers recently. He had also been strongly pushing for corrective measures to control the asset bubble and reinigate the economy. The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) summoned Adhikari and Chief Secretary Madhav Prasad Giri for clarification, but the minister failed to be present for the meeting on Thursday.

USAID

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) launched its Nepal Economic, Agriculture and Trade (NEAT) Project in Nepal on Tuesday. A US$30 million project will help engage the private sector to improve the country’s foundations for rapid, sustained, and inclusive private-sector-led economic growth. “This program is an important new endeavour that seeks to improve the business environment, work with the government of Nepal to strengthen fiscal and trade policies, encourage competitiveness and exports, enhance food security, and increase the access to financial services,” US ambassador Scott H. DeLaIs has said.
Visiting Achham last month, it was heartening to see that the airport in Saphebagar, which was blown up during a Maoist attack in February 2002, is finally being rebuilt. A new terminal building with a blue tin roof is already up, and all that remains now is the construction of the control tower. The runway may have fallen into disuse for aviation purposes, but hasn’t gone to waste: this year the Saphe Mahotsav was celebrated at one end! Hopefully once flights resume, events such as these will find other venues.

Back in 2002, the Maoists laid siege to Saphebagar and the headquarters of Achham, Mangalsen, on the same night. In Mangalsen, progress in rebuilding the old palace that went up in smoke that night seems to have slowed. Construction is yet to move beyond the windows on the ground floor.

Nevertheless, it feels good to see Nepal inching back to some sense of normalcy following the violent conflict. But just so we don’t forget what the war was like for our fellow Nepalis, particularly in the countryside, the government should preserve at least some of the destroyed structures in the condition that they are in now. These ‘monuments’ would serve as a reminder of how bad things were and how it could be just as bad in the future if we are not careful.

One such building is the police post in Chaukhute village, Achham. This post, strategically located on a mound to the right of the highway just as one drives into Achham from Doli, is a striking sight. The concrete roof and walls have caved in, in the most dramatic fashion. Fortunately for the wary policemen once posted there, they were spending the night in the jungle when the blast brought the post down.

A replacement police post can easily be built elsewhere in the vicinity. Chaukhute could be part of a series of ‘war and peace’ exhibits around the country, included in educational and other historical tours. It can then take its place alongside other reminders of the recent conflict, as well as the forts of yore.
EVENTS

KJC’s choir classes, by Australian bassist Marcus Dengate. Jazz, gospel and popular music. Every Friday, 5 to 6pm, Jhamsikhel. 5013554, info@katjazz.com.np

DINING

Brick by Brick, a multimedia event to promote clean and green bricks, with photo exhibition by Achinto, Nepal’s first flashmob. This ‘The Domino Effect’, with live music and a contemporary set performance by Karl Knapp will also take place 9 April, 4pm, Jawalakhel Football Ground, free entry, www.brickstein.net

Momotarou, serves Japanese food that is top value for money. Extravagant taste yet humble in presentation. Thamel and Sanepa

Ghangri Café, a quiet place with comfortable sofas and a lovely atmosphere for a night of drinks and a contemporary dinner. You will be blown away. Le Bistro Restaurant & Bar, Charoi, Nepal’s famous for its fresh sashimi, sushi, sukiyaki or tempura, their experienced Japanese and Nepali chefs are sure to impress. Darbar Marg

GETAWAYS

Fulbari Resort & Spa, Pokhara, 4461918, 4462248

Club Himalaya, for amazing mountain views and refreshing weekend escapades, special package available for Nepalis and expatriates. Nagarkot, 4410432

Grand Norling Hotel, countryside weekend package offering suite room, swimming, gym, message, and discounts on other facilities. Gokarna, 4910193

Koto Restaurant, the first Japanese restaurant in Kathmandu, serves up 25 years of history. Whether it’s the fresh sashimi, suki, sukiyaki or tempura, their experienced Japanese and Nepali chefs are sure to impress. Darbar Marg

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MUSIC

Freedom in the Groove, the Acoustic Bass in Case, KJC’s master class by Ian Eustis, 4 April, 5pm, KJC, Jhamsikhel. 5013554, info@katjazz.com.np

Le Bistro Restaurant & Bar, the outdoor dining area invokes a great atmosphere for a night of drinks with friends and family. While they serve a plethora of dishes, it is the Indian food they pride themselves on. Thamel. 4701170
**The storytellers**

Twenty emerging Nepali photographers recently concluded a four-week photography course titled *Introduction to Visual Storytelling*. The course, organised by photo.circle and tutored by a mix of Nepali and Bangladeshi experts, aimed to introduce participating photographers to a wide range of visual styles and aesthetics. It focused on building narratives, which the participants duly attempted with stories set in the city around them. The result is a delightful, thoughtful mix of photos that remind us just how variegated life in the Kathmandu Valley is. Over three dozen photos by the participants will be on display at Nepal Art Council next week in the exhibition *Kathmandu, Kathmandu*.

7-13 April, 12-7pm, Nepal Art Council, Babar Mahal

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**DECHENLING**

Entering Thamel, cut right just below Himalayan Java and walk some way down the street to the entrance on your left.

Clientese, was wonderful, if only for the novelty of the celery with meat. Dechenling has a fair bit more to offer, including Phing (rice noodle) combinations, more conventional Tibetan stews, and the ubiquitous momos. It could make more of a lovely setting by working harder on the presentation of its fare, and some might quibble with the size of some portions. But if you want a change from the usual continental mishmash, and be in Thamel without feeling like you’re in the heart of the misshapen beast, then Dechenling’s a charmer, and ideal for couples and big gatherings alike.

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**SOMEPLACE ELSE**

It’s worth remembering that Thamel traces its roots to Thamel, the first neighbourhood to attract young Nepalis seeking a little more than home dalbhat and Nepal Television for an evening’s entertainment. Despite the proliferation of sleaze and poverty, there are still establishments here that are more about food than the happy hour cocktails, leaden rock classics, and popcorn baskets so beloved of backpackers. Dechenling Garden, right before you enter the maw of Thamel, is one of these.

The pleasant, spacious garden seating under canvas tops somewhat negated by the rattle of the generator and fluorescent lighting, we ventured further in to discover warmly lit indoor seating. But my attempt to recall the memory of a honeyed cocktail of a winter’s eve didn’t work too well. The Dechenling Special with vodka, gin, soda and honey, completely flat and unappealing in a wine glass with a straw, was only redeemed by lemon juice on demand. Beer please! And on to the Tibetan and Bhutanese specials the place is known for.

The Shapta and Shabhalay – the waiters are happy to explain this is sliced and fried buff or chicken, and meat in a pastry – were both scrumptious enough for us to save some for home. It was harder to choose between the mains, since there were so many intriguingly unknown quantities. But how could we resist the Bhutanese Erma Dhatsi, a chilli, cheese and mushroom curry? You’d not think it would work when you saw the creamy concoction but it does, though there could be more vegetables in the mix. The Tibetan Shaprel was as solid as only momathsals can be, but its compatriot, the Sha Tema
Hepatitis E is the commonest cause of adult jaundice in Nepal. The infectious diseases hospital in Teku will soon witness the annual rise in Hepatitis E patients. This viral disease is transmitted through the consumption of raw or inadequately iodinated water for at least 20 minutes, which would be less of a problem; but eating these vegetables uncooked increases the risk of acquiring Hepatitis E and other interesting organisms. Most people that are afflicted by this disease eventually recover, but if you are pregnant, things could easily take a turn for the worse. Twenty to thirty per cent of pregnant women with Hepatitis E die of liver failure.

Twenty-one-year-old Gyanu Thapa, an affluent housewife in Kathmandu, always drank boiled water at home. But when she was pregnant she craved the momos from a little restaurant on the street. She thought it was OK to drink the tap water served there, only to come down with jaundice and eventually Hepatitis E. Within weeks she died of fulminant liver failure despite the best efforts of her physicians. A vaccine could have prevented her tragic death.

An effective Hepatitis E vaccine was developed five years ago with the collaboration of the Nepal Army, Glaxo Smith Kline, and the US Army. But Glaxo lost interest in its commercial development when it realised that this product would not rake in the money. The good news is that the Chinese have recently developed an effective Hepatitis E vaccine (HEV 239) and appear to be determined to make sure it does not go the Glaxo way.

A dependable supply of clean drinking water would eliminate this problem. But that, of course, is easier said than done in Nepal.
Walking through this serene village nestled in the rolling hills of Dolakha district, it is difficult to imagine things were ever any different here. Between 200 and 400 people reside in Simigaon today, the majority of who are Sherpa or Tamang, and most men leave the village for seasonal trekking work. A small hydroelectric generator powers households and a single phone connects the villagers to the outside world.

Yet Simigaon, while never the site of a battle between the Maoists and state forces, was right on the fault lines of the civil war. By 2001, the Maoists frequented the hills surrounding the village. Initially, plainclothes fighters established bases of operation but as the war progressed, uniformed Maoist soldiers began to appear in the area. As a result of the war, the VDC positions are still vacant. There was once a police station, but a Maoist bomb threat scared the police away. All for the better, thought the villagers, bomb threat scared the police away.

The village farms grow millet, potatoes, corn, and wheat. Villagers must trek a day to the nearest trading post where they can buy or exchange their produce for rice, peppers, and other commodities. A road was to be built that would have made the exchange of goods much easier, but the war diverted resources and the project remains incomplete today. The trouble does not end with the long walk, either. Once at the trade post, villagers find that goods are much more expensive than they used to be, a result of inflation during the war.

Education is another source of persistent frustration. Kochhiri, a student during the war, explained that during the war the Maoists would often come to the school in Simigaon and interrupt the usual curriculum to teach Maoist ideology. Such intrusions sapped the effectiveness of the already mediocre education system in Simigaon. The effects linger today, both because students fell behind during such interruptions and because without a local VDC, the local school lacks direction and structural support. And of course, the specter of violence that haunted the village then has never quite gone away. Leaving the village during the war, while often necessary, was particularly dangerous. Ambushes occurred frequently along the roads and paranoid soldiers could not always distinguish between Maoist fighters and villagers. As Anglakpa, a village leader, explained, explosives were strewn all around the village. The poster in the health centre warning residents speaks of the enduring threat. Maoists often came to the houses in Simigaon demanding food and shelter, and villagers such as Tendi Ama (see box) had no choice but to acquiesce, even though they would be threatened by the Army subsequently.

Coverage of the war has usually focused either on the overarching political aspects of the struggle or on areas where heavy conflict or atrocities took place. Yet there were many more villages like Simigaon that were equally if more indirectly traumatised by the presence of the Maoists and the Army. The residents of Simigaon, like villagers throughout the hills of Nepal, became the pawns of a political struggle far removed from their own lives, and it is stories like theirs that often fall into the cracks of history.

Tendi Ama

An opinionated and passionate woman, Tendi Ama remains haunted by her experiences during the war. She bitterly recalls the time when Maoist fighters occupied her home forcibly and a bolt-action rifle went off indoors. In the confusion that ensued, she feared for her life. She had to spend several nights away from her house, only to return to find her food supplies exhausted and livestock slaughtered. Ever defiant, Tendi Ama has not forgiven the intruders and claims that if they ever return, she will face them with a Khukuri.
Rocking out in Afghanistan

At the American University in Kabul around 500 people are watching Kabul Dreams – Afghanistan’s only rock band – play live on stage. The band is going wild and a group of fans are shouting and raising their hands in excitement. Rock music is still nascent in Afghanistan, but that hasn’t stopped the band from dreaming big.

“One of the main goals of this band is to show a different side of Afghanistan to the world, to show that Afghanistan is not just the home of war, violence, killings, political debates and explosions. The rock band has got people interested and helps create a positive image of Afghanistan. Things are going really well,” says Mujtaba Habibi, the band’s drummer.

The three members of Kabul Dreams are from different parts of Afghanistan and speak different languages, so many of the songs on their first album are in English. However, 20-year-old lead singer Sulaiman Qardash says the band plans to use local languages on the next album.

“We are working on another album where the songs are in our national languages Pashto, Dari and Uzbeki, and it will be released in the next two months. Most of our lyrics are very positive, we sing about love – love of your country, love of your mother and friends, and love for everyone,” he says.

One of their songs, in Persian, talks about the need for unity among Afghans and it is often heard on the airwaves. Kabul Rock Radio, Afghanistan’s only FM station dedicated to rock, has been particularly supportive of the band.

“We felt Afghans needed to be cheered up after 30 years of war so we established Kabul Rock Radio in March 2009. Later, the members of Kabul Dreams started working for us. They are producers and presenters at the station and they also fully run the station now,” says Najiba Ayubi, managing director of The Killid Group, which owns the station.

In my free time I like listening to rock music, especially Kabul Dreams, because they are really different from other Afghan bands,” says fan Rohullah Samadi. “They are original and have a great style of singing that’s unique. We also hear foreign rock bands but now we have our own and it feels great to be listening to Afghan rock singers.”

Nasir Ahmad Sarmast is the president of Afghanistan National Institute of Music and he says rock music is something very new to Afghanistan. “Rock music made its way to Afghanistan around 2001. One of the best things about Afghanistan when it comes to music is that our society is very open to accepting different types of music. We are seeing a strong interest in rock music among young people, but we will have to wait and see whether it will find a long-term place in Afghanistan,” he says.

For Sediq Ahmad, the guitarist and third member of Kabul Dreams, it’s not easy being the country’s only rock band.

“To keep the band going is not an easy task. The first challenge that we are facing and we have faced since the beginning is financial. Not a lot of people are interested in sponsoring us and there are not many venues or facilities for recording,” he says. However, he adds, there’s no doubt it’s the start of something great.

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RUBEE NAHATO

N epal’s successful experiment with community electrification, which has connected 135,000 households to the grid in just seven years, is facing a major setback with the dissolution of the Community Rural Electrification Department. On 13 October, just before the start of the Dasain holidays, a meeting of the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) abruptly dissolved the department. It was justified as part of a restructuring drive in NEA. But the move has not just created an institutional vacuum, pushing the work of about 300 electrification user groups across the country into limbo. More pertinently for NEA, it has allowed for its greater control over the consumer-led program, sparking fears that NEA’s endemic corruption will now seep into the movement.

Under the community-led model, user groups partnered with the government to bring electricity to villages that were off the grid. Communities took charge of distribution, maintenance, and even construction costs, with government providing the rest. These community-managed systems are so well administered that pilferage is non-existent and systems are so well administered the luckier ones. Finance Minister Acharya conceded that he had no idea what transpired in the fateful meeting that terminated the department of community electrification. Secretary at the Ministry of Energy, Shital Babu Regmi, declined to comment.

Faced with crippling power cuts in the capital, it is easy to forget about the 55 per cent of rural Nepal that isn’t connected to the grid. But community electrification is one of Nepal’s few success stories, and high-level visits from Bhutan and Laos indicated international interest in the model. By forcibly incorporating a community-driven program into the centralised and ineffective institution that is NEA, the government is guaranteeing that its success will be short-lived.

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Power to the people

With the dismantling of the department responsible for rural electrification, the government seems determined to undermine another community-led Nepali success.

Bharat Mohan Adhikari, who is also from Morang, has apparently promised to fine him Rs 5 million. Never mind the unknown provenance of said Rs 5 million, what about other user groups who may have already invested their communities’ savings? Dilli Ghimire is indignant. “We have never faced such problems before. With the department, we could at least be sure that the consumers’ money would be used where it was meant to be. NEA is so unmanageably corrupt that any program it handles is bound to fail,” he says. Narayan Gyawali, General Secretary of NACEUN, is equally clear in his condemnation. “There are no two ways about it. The department was dissolved suddenly so that in power can use the 20-80 fund for their interests. Why else would a successfully running program be interrupted?”

There may be good reason to believe this is already happening. This year, consumers deposited Rs 160 million into the 20-80 fund, which should have attracted Rs 640 million in government funding for community electrification. Since the department’s dissolution, however, just Rs 310 million has been allocated. “The remaining amount will now be spent according to the whims of the ministers and officials,” Ghimire says.

When asked about the allegations, joint spokesperson at the Ministry of Energy Purusottam Acharya conceded that he had no idea what transpired in the fateful meeting that terminated the department of community electrification. Secretary at the Ministry of Energy, Shital Babu Regmi, declined to comment.

Faced with crippling power cuts in the capital, it is easy to forget about the 55 per cent of rural Nepal that isn’t connected to the grid. But community electrification is one of Nepal’s few success stories, and high-level visits from Bhutan and Laos indicated international interest in the model. By forcibly incorporating a community-driven program into the centralised and ineffective institution that is NEA, the government is guaranteeing that its success will be short-lived.
No, minister

Editorial in Nagatik, 30 March

Finance Secretary Rameshwor Khanal’s resignation came at a time when he was investigating the fake VAT bill scam. Since Khanal was already under pressure from a certain group of businessmen, he decided to quit once he learned that the political leadership was not willing to support him.

Known for his honesty and integrity, Khanal had already said he would rather resign than compromise. The resignation of one of most capable and untainted secretaries in the country is a stain on the record of Jhala Nath Khanal’s government. The ouster of the secretary, who was admired for his financial reforms, has made it more difficult to achieve the good governance needed to save the country’s failing economy. This is an issue of national dignity.

The VAT scam was not the only reason for Khanal’s resignation. The new government could not digest the practical suggestion of a supplementary budget either. As the political parties routinely milk the ministries to fund their parties, the coalition did not want Khanal to return to his ministry.

To approve Khanal’s resignation would be to ridicule the administrative professionalism, capability and impartiality of the Finance Ministry, not to mention demoralize ministry staff. The bureaucracy will be further politicised and corrupted, and it will set a wrong precedent.

Energy crisis

The government has declared an energy emergency. Deputy PM Bhanu Mohan Adhikari proclaimed an energy crisis over the next four years, and announced the government’s action plan.

Earlier, the Dahal-led government had also declared an energy emergency, following which there was extensive debate on energy alternatives. The pros and cons of diesel plants were discussed. But politics pushed the energy debate onto the backburner. The lesson is that no plan really works until the country’s politics is settled. The present government may have declared an energy emergency, but with a half-formed cabinet, its goals are unlikely to be realised.

To split or not to split?

Analysis in Dristi, 29 March

Given the language used by the Maoist leaders and the dirty games they are playing, one can’t help but wonder how long the party will survive. Shalikram Jamarkattel, the chairperson of the All Nepal Trade Union (Maoist) said in a meeting at Khanna Garment that Baburam Bhattarai should be smeared with soot for trying to split the party, and that Netra Bikram Chand should be boycotted. He even ordered physical action against Bhattarai and his supporters at a program organised at Everest Hotel, saying that he would be ready to face the consequences.

YCL Newa Committee in charge Chandra Bahadur Thapa has gone so far as to say that the Baidiya and Bhattarai factions should be buried alive. Recently, even Maoist Chairman Prachanda indicated party action could be taken against Bhattarai.

UML’s example is enough to show how internal struggles within a party can weaken it and push it to disintegration. The recent activities of Maoist leaders show that they are headed in the same direction.

Prachanda is in a dilemma about whether to take action against Bhattarai before he actually splits from the party or to wait for him to make a move. Party insiders say Prachanda wants Bhattarai to declare the split so that he can blame all the failures of the ten-year war on him and clear himself of any wrongdoing. He also wants to woo the Baidiya faction so that he can project the image of an undivided party under him.

But the Bhattarai faction has got wind of Prachanda’s intentions. Their plan is to stay put in spite of all the pressure until Prachanda initiates party action against him. Once that happens they will portray themselves as martyrs and then form a new party. Bhattarai is busy soliciting the support of CA members, and there are around five dozen MPs’ supporting Bhattarai at the moment. The Prachanda-Baidiya faction is trying hard to stop other MPs’ from going to Bhattarai’s side, and to win back those who have already declared their allegiance.

Shopkeeper: Take the firewood, brother. Those who declared the energy crisis took all the cooking gas away.

Batsyayan in Kantipur, 26 March

The declaration of an energy emergency implies that national economic policy will be focused on tiding over the energy shortage in the next four years. But we should be focused on developing a comprehensive energy plan and implementing it. We should find an alternative to petroleum, keeping in mind that the hydropower regime is rife with corruption and power politics. Political will is central to addressing the energy crisis.
Cooling without heating

Narmaya Tamang is a Grade 8 student at the Khumjung School and says she sees signs of climate change all around her. The snowline is receding on Ama Dablam, which she sees from her classroom window. It is getting warmer year by year, and there is less winter snow.

Narmaya, with classmates Kabindra Rai and Lakpa Tenzing, are members of the Eco Club at the Khumjung School, and they thought they knew what caused this: emissions from fossil fuel burning that led to global warming. What they didn’t know is that there is another, even more dangerous greenhouse gas: hydrochlorofluorocarbon (HCFC).

HCFCs replaced the CFCs that were the main cause of the depletion of the earth’s ozone layer that protects the planet’s surface from harmful ultraviolet rays. The Montreal Protocol phased out all CFCs by 2010, and the ozone hole over Antarctica has stopped growing. But while solving one problem (ozone depletion) another was created. HCFC is 2,000 times more potent than carbon dioxide as a greenhouse gas.

“We knew that the chemical that saves the ozone layer is causing the earth to warm even more,” Narmaya says.

Narmaya, Kabindra and Lakpa took part in an interaction last week at Syangboche organised by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to draw the attention of Nepal’s legislators to the twin dangers of ozone depletion and climate change. Although Nepal ratified the Montreal Protocol and phased out CFC imports last year, it is now the only country in Asia not to have ratified amendments to the Montreal Protocol to replace HCFCs.

The draft laws were approved by the previous government, but because of the delays in the formation of the new cabinet and parliamentary sittings the treaty has not been ratified yet,” explains Sitaram Joshi, head of the Department of Standards and Metrology.

Ozone depletion in the southern hemisphere has increased the incidence of skin cancer and cataracts, affecting even livestock and plants. Because CFCs remove the earth’s ozone sun block, people living in Nepal’s high altitude areas are also more susceptible. The other danger is that the continued emission of harmful refrigerants and air-conditioning gases, especially by industries in India and China, exacerbate climate change.

The head of UNEP’s Paris-based Ozone Action Programme, Rajendra Shende, said in Syangboche that early ratification by Nepal of the Copenhagen and Beijing Amendments to the Montreal Protocol would unlock up to US$2 million in technical assistance for a phase-out. “Nepal has an excellent past record in compliance, but the need to address both ozone depletion and climate change has given ratification an added urgency,” Shende added.

Official sources say the draft law and documentation is now awaiting a slot in the parliamentary schedule.
Liquidity crisis in blood bank

My favourite headline till Tuesday was the above, and I thought nothing could beat that till it was dislodged by this one (pictured). An abir jatra and nagar parikrama coming right up for the sub in question.

Comrade Rain Man is still the commander of the People’s Liberation Army and now also Piece Minister so it was only fitting that he should attend the annual jamboree of the Nepal Scouts in Lainchour the other day. He wore a khaki uniform (not shorts, thankfully) a kerchief, and gave the host a smart three-finger salute. And then, lo and behold, Rain Man raised his hand and took the Boy Scout oath, repeating in lip sync: “On my honour, I will do my best to do my duty to God, and my Country and to obey the Scout Law, to keep myself mentally strong and morally straight…” He should have just publicly renounced violence as long as he was at it, since it looks like the PLA is turning into a Cub Scout Pack anyway.

For those who are still asking “Have we turned into a nation of crooks?” let me once and for all put the uncertainty to rest with a firm “Yes.” And proof of that is the rampant ‘chit’-ing in the ongoing SLC exams, which has surpassed all previous records. Chits have gone digital, with students now getting answers via SMS and taking dictation through mobiles. A CA member got her daughter to sit for exams and when she was found out, came to give her exams herself the next day with bodyguards who apparently helped her with the test. A DEO was caught writing the answers on the blackboard, while another DEO who prevented cheating was beaten to a pulp in Palpa. Journalists who got access to exam rooms to take pictures for the papers were caught in flagrante helping relatives with answers. The Ministry of Re-education says it is deliberately allowing cheating because, as one official put it, “How else are these students going to fit into a society of thugs?” Never thought of it that way: cheating in exams is an integral part of vocational education in this kleptocratic republic.

As part of our effort to gauge the public’s awareness of political issues, Backside is conducting a poll. Please fill out this questionnaire by ticking one answer and send to ass@nepalitimes.com. The first all correct answer will receive a gift hamper of oatmeal. Women are encouraged to apply and cheating is allowed:

1. Two months later, why hasn’t the prime minister still not been able to complete the cabinet?
   a. Carpenters have all gone to the Gulf
   b. Forum wallahs want phoren
   c. Baddies want home
   d. Oli’s boys want in

2. Why does Chairman Awesome keep going to Singapore?
   a. Stop by at StanChart at Suntec tower
   b. Meet uncooked handlers
   c. Meet wok operatives
   d. All of the above

3. What is the real reason the Baddies are at each others’ throats?
   a. They are doing to themselves what they did to others
   b. Jam Cuttle is keeping the casino cash all to himself
   c. BRB and PKD are bitter rivals in Stalin Look-alike Contest
   d. They’re hoodwinking us all by pretending to fight

4. Why can’t the Kangrejis get off their asses?
   a. Because they possess big bottoms
   b. Hey, watch who you’re calling an ass
   c. As a donkey I take umbrage at all this
   d. As a donkey you shouldn’t be using the ‘a’ word

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A lack of liquidity in the blood bank is a serious issue, and it is important to address this promptly. The recent liquidity crisis in the blood bank has raised concerns about the adequacy of blood supply and the reliability of blood banks. This highlights the need for increased efforts to ensure a steady and sufficient blood supply. The ongoing efforts to improve the blood donation process and increase awareness among the public are crucial in addressing this issue. It is essential to take immediate action to resolve the liquidity crisis in the blood bank to ensure that patients receive the necessary blood transfusions.