Which political party would you trust the most to lead the country towards peace, prosperity and democracy?

Which political party is most responsible for obstructing the constitution drafting and peace process in the last one year?

Himalmedia has been conducting public opinion surveys almost every year for the past 10 years. The 2011 poll was carried out last week in 38 districts, interviewing a statistical random sampling of 4,000 respondents.

Compared to last year’s poll, the people are more vocal in expressing their frustration with the continued political deadlock. Their trust in the three main parties is at an all-time low. They see the continued polarisation between the NC and the Maoists as the main reason, but are convinced that the only way forward is a government of national unity.

The survey had some significant revelations:

- If the political parties mend their ways, the people are willing to grant a six-month extension of the CA, otherwise nearly half the respondents said it would be better to have fresh elections.
- A majority think ethnicity-based federalism is a bad idea.
- Asked to name three main problems the country faces, a majority listed inflation, constitution deadlock, and political instability.
- A majority felt health, education and transportation services had improved and reaffirmed the role of local communities in development, and they were for holding local elections.

Which political party would you trust the most to lead the country towards peace, prosperity and democracy?

Which political party is most responsible for obstructing the constitution drafting and peace process in the last one year?

Not surprising that the level of frustration of the people is at an all-time high.

The people say they want local and national elections to elect better leaders.
FeW SURPRISES

Jai Nath Khanal got a slap in the face when he visited Sunsari in March from a fellow-UCM cadre. Last month, the Maoist CA ex-veteran from Kathmandu, Prachanda Subedi, was slapped by a coffee shop owner who had voted for him in 2008. The results of this year’s Himalmedia Public Opinion Poll, which we summarise in this issue, are a slap in the collective faces of Nepal’s rulers since 2008.

There are no surprises here. Over 4,000 respondents interviewed last week across the country expressed huge disillusionment with the political establishment and elected representatives. Their班子成员 have been held almost every year for the past 12 years. One consistent message that has come through in all these polls is that the Nepali people are traditionally moderate, they reject all forms of political violence and extremism, they yearn for peace and development.

They blame the political parties, but they also know that they have to work with them. This year is no different. It may be unfair, but a lot of the generalised blame has gone to CA members, who are seen to be a good-for-nothing lot, always absent from house sittings, just interested in collecting their allowances, or indulging in nefarious activities like selling their red passports. This is unfortunate because the past progress that was made has been in the committees who have worked on different sections of the new constitution.

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They got stuck on the political choices of future state structure, and there the hands of CA members have been tied because of a broader deadlock in political power-sharing between the personalities in the three parties. The respondents pinpoint the ideological polarisation between the NC and the Maoists as the main reason for the delay, and a majority felt that if the CA term can’t be extended new elections should be held.

Tainted Politics

everyone is complaining. Yet no one is doing anything. (Curtain raiser #552) All politicians from the three big parties are best friends. They help each other, get richer and richer. The dirty, filthy politicians will surely one day meet the same fate as that of Hoinin Mubarak or the disgraced President of Israel. It’s only a matter of time. Everyone made a big deal about the Home Ministry, but the Maoists still got it. The US has 50 states and 100 senators and 435 House of Representatives. Nepal, a very small country, has 651 lawmakers. What a waste of resources and what a disgrace, especially with the scandal of selling and renting of diplomatic passports. Nepalis have nothing to be proud of these days, we always have to hang our heads in shame.

Shankar Lal Shrestha

Who Let the Genie Out?

‘The Bahun-dominated Maoist leadership can’t put the genie back into the bottle.’ (Editorial, #552)

Why only Bahun-dominated ‘Maoist’ leadership? Didn’t the Bahun-dominated leadership of all parties – the Bahun-dominated leadership of journalists and civil society egg on the Maoists, uncork that genie from its bottle?

The political and intellectual elites of Nepal including the Bahun editors of this paper hastened and hurried the Maoists into our cities and government, into violating political ethics, at all. This kind of duplicity and dishonesty is why the youth of Nepal are leaving the country in droves, with no future in the hands of a generation of old, lying Bahun leaders - political, intellectual and journalistic.

Mr. Dixit, next time you’re tempted to blame the political class for dishonesty or insincerity, look to yourself first. Were you thoroughly unaware of the Maoists’ abuse of identity politics? If we can’t expect honesty from the so-called ‘intellectuals’ of our country, how can we expect it from the politicians?

Anonymous

- The Maoists appropriated the grievances of the marginalised and successfully channelled it for recruitment during the war. In the 2008 elections, they channelised it again, this time to get votes. Most Nepalis don’t know how good Lenin and Mao used ethnic autonomy not to devolve power but to centralise it through totalitarian state systems were easily duped, you write in your editorial. All this reminds me of George Orwell’s Animal Farm.

During the revolution

All animals are equal.
No animal shall sleep in a bed.
No animal shall drink alcohol.
No animal shall kill any other animal.

After the revolution

All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.

CLICK

Kasto gazab ko taastai! (Backside, #552) All three are getting instructions on their phones from their party bosses, Sushil Koirala, Prachanda and Jhalanath. As long as journalists are puppets of the political parties, there is no hope for FNL.

Surendra

Hats Off

Keep on the great work, I sincerely appreciate the work that Sarita, Krishna and Rajaran (‘The power of three’, #552) are doing and hope their work will bring positive changes in the lives of children and mothers. I also wish that other men and women will be greatly inspired and follow suit.

Surendra

Walk the Talk

Mr. Vaidya, what concrete plans do you have in your mind to create jobs? (‘An investor in search of a friend’, Nepal Times, #552) Just create jobs. Let people invest in business. Why is it that when a foreigner wants to start up or invest in a small business in Nepal, we are always confronted by suspicion that we have some sinister motivation? Why so hostile, when a less xenophobic attitude towards genuine small investors could provide a lot of jobs to young Nepalis?

Teresa

When Leaders Don’t Embrace Leadership, that’s what is lacking in Nepal. (‘Who Cares?’, #552) I want a leader to emerge, and I want masses to come spontaneously to ground, together, march into these government buildings and complexes, and take our destiny in our own hand. How I wish we could do this. But I know this is a pipe dream in Nepal. The poor perish, the middle class lingers on, and rich fly ever higher on the backs of the poor.

Raul

Survey

Weekly Internet Poll #553: To vote go to: www.nepaltimes.com

Q. Should Nepali Congress have joined the Coalition?

Total votes: 2,070

Yes: 352
No: 106
I don’t know: 48

Q. Should the Jhala Nath Khanal government be replaced?

Total votes: 2,071

Yes: 532
No: 642
I don’t know: 497
A decade of democratic deficit

Local elections needed to spur local development, most survey respondents say

The absence of elected representatives at the local bodies has not only stalled the local development works, it has also bred corruption. The all-party mechanism, which is entrusted with overseeing local affairs in the interim period, has become an exclusive club of powerful three parties, discredited for its lack of transparency and accountability. The survey reveals that people are largely unaware about the all-party mechanism, and most still go to their old elected representatives for any local matters. Those who have heard about it are largely dismissive of the all-party mechanism, and the sense is that they are no substitute for elected representatives.

Survey findings show that people in general feel that the education and health services at the local level have improved significantly, but they give little credit to the all-party mechanism that has been involved in local governance since 2006. This improvement is obviously a cumulative effect of targeted government programs, surge in skilled manpower in the villages due to programs like CTEVT, consistent NGO presence in education and health, and the foreign aid pouring in the country as a drive to meet Millennium Development Goals. Besides, the penetration of media in the remote areas appears to have also contributed to raising awareness level on importance of health and education.

Local bodies are vital to all democracies, and their continuous absence in Nepal has weakened the institution at its roots. The political parties who speak of institutionalising democracy seem to have forgotten its fundamentals: the foundations have to be laid before the structure can be erected. The Himalmedia poll also shows that although the political landscape looks messy, people are very clear about the way forward: they want local elections to kick-start local development again as it did in the early 1990s.

They also overwhelmingly want the parties to stop politicising development at the district and village level. If the local perception is that health, education and transportation have improved in the past five years, imagine how much more progress we’d have made with more accountable elected leaders at the local level.

There is nothing in the interim constitution that prevents us from going for local elections. There is never a wrong time for democracy.
You don’t need to be a Nobel-laureate economist to deduce that Nepal is technically insolvent. Our balance of trade deficit in the last fiscal year (2009-10) amounted to Rs320 billion. It was only Rs216 billion the year before. Our balance of payment deficit during the same period was Rs 2.92 billion. It was favorable by Rs38 billion the previous year.

The business community, renowned economists and the “hydrocracy” argue that the only way out is to export hydropower.

Using hydro-dollars to mitigate our trade deficit with India is a myth

Susan Goldmark, the World Bank country director in Nepal, lent credence to this diagnosis by declaring that Nepal’s GDP could be comparable to that of Saudi Arabia if we exported hydropower. Actually, it is because Nepal for the past two decades concentrated on projects to export hydropower that we are suffering an energy crisis in both electricity and petroleum products. This situation will get worse unless policymakers reexamine and realign the country’s energy policy. Nepal’s famed potential of 43,000 MW will generate 188 billion kilowatt-hours (units) of electricity if implemented at 50 per cent average plant factor (which ranges from 20-25 per cent for storage projects to 65-70 per cent for run-of-the-river projects). Exporting at $0.05/kWh (the rate for peak-in West Sipin power that India’s PTC agreed to) will generate a revenue of $9.4 billion/year, which amounts to only 3 per cent of Saudi Arabia’s GDP in 2006.

Many people have also jumped to the conclusion that exporting power will mitigate Nepal’s balance of payment deficit. Not true. Even at a low ballpark cost of $1,000 per kilowatt, implementing 43,000 MW will entail an investment of $43 billion which is beyond Nepal’s means. The only alternative is to build with foreign direct investment which will also mean that almost all of the hydrodollars will be repatriated from Nepal as return on investment and debt service, except for royalties to be paid to the government (income from hydropower being a natural resource income hence electricity VAT-able) and a small amount spent on local salaries, a substantial portion of which will go for exapt wages. The operation and maintenance cost of such projects and corporate overheads will also not stay in Nepal. Only three percent of the dollars we generate from exporting hydropower will actually stay in Nepal, and will help ease our balance of payment deficit to that extent only.

A country’s economy benefits from value addition due to increased exports.

This manifests in favourable balance of trade, triggered by augmented employment as a consequence of industrialisation necessary for incremental production for export. But in the case of hydro-dollars, the value addition will not be commensurate to export, it will be limited by the quantum of percolation into Nepal’s economy. Ninety-seven percent of hydro-dollars flowing out of the economy will not meaningfully add value, and will neither increase industrialisation nor generate employment.

Nepal’s priority should be to use hydropower for value addition and to wean ourselves from our dependence on imported petroleum (which aggravates the balance of trade and payment deficit) by electifying the public transportation system (also generating carbon offset benefits) thereby ensuring overall energy security. We must also aim to supplant the use of animal and agricultural residue and firewood, which cause indoor pollution that reduces the productive life of, mainly, women.

This doesn’t mean that hydropower shouldn’t be exported at all. But it would be foolish for Nepal to have projects built to export at around Rs2 per unit, and import at over Rs10 just to mitigate load-shedding and perpetuate our dependency on petroleum. The country’s best interest will be served by buying electricity at the lowest rate from developers capable of building projects cost effectively, and use the electricity to meet our own demand to supplant non-renewable and unclean sources. Nepal, not the project developers, should export the remaining electricity at premium price, because demand and price in India is highest when Nepal’s “sin” energy is during the monsoon.

“Power can be our most valuable export”

Gyanendra Lal Pradhan, chairman of Hydro Solutions, who has been involved in development of several hydropower projects, talks to Nepal Times about why power export is the most viable outlet from the trade deficit.

Nepali Times: How can we consider exporting power when we can’t even sustain domestic demand?

Gyanendra Lal Pradhan: With 16-hours of power cut, the idea of exporting electricity may sound absurd. But in order to build capacity to export in next 5-10 years, we need to start now. The domestic demand is at about 1000 MW right now and even in next 20 years it will not surpass Nepal’s hydro potential of 83,000 MW or more. Export is necessary because we will have excess power. Secondly, the opportunity cost of not investing in export projects is huge because unlike mineral reserves, electricity is a time bound resource. Once the water flows, it’s a loss. Thirdly, focusing on export projects will optimise the usage of our rivers and decrease the cost per unit. For example, Upper Karnali would be constructed to produce only 300MW instead of 900MW, and the cost would be higher, if its export potential was not considered. And most importantly, electricity is the most valuable export for Nepal.

How so?

Our other exports such as manpower, garlic, herbs, and garment cannot help match the trade deficit of Rs 300 billion. Our biggest export right now is steel worth Rs 15 billion, but even this requires import of Rs 13 billion worth of raw materials. Hydropower is one area that can make significant contribution to the balance of payment without much need to import raw materials. The export does not have to be limited to India. We can also export to Bangladesh and there are more opportunities, if the SAARC grid project is made possible.

But such projects will not be possible in Nepal without FDI. Will that not endanger repatriation of profits? True, we do not have the capacity to invest in such projects and the international investors required will have vested interest in profits. But we need to look at the overall benefit to the country rather than complain about what will go into their pockets. Nepal’s advantage is in hydropower and this is one area where international investors will be interested. FDI means foreign currency will enter the country. Once a project starts, local people will get employment. Local resources will be bought and used. And when it completes, government will earn in terms of tax royalty and power capacity.

What needs to be done policy-wise to ensure that the country benefits? A special office has to be initiated under the prime minister’s jurisdiction to see FDI projects in hydropower. We need to insert the clause to allow us to buy back power when there is shortage. Policy about the benefits to the local community has to be clear. Local employment can be ensured by adding regulations that require international investors to use local manpower. We have to have political consensus, proper dialogue and security for these projects to run. We have to take advantage of our hydro potential and make smart decisions.
Two hundred Nepalis with no overt political affiliations gathered at Kathmandu’s Maitighar Mandala last Saturday to make this point: despite being paid by taxpayers for the past two plus one years, 601 Constituent Assembly members have failed to draft a constitution.

Tomorrow, in greater numbers, the protestors plan to assemble outside the CA premises in New Baneswor to demand a constitution.

The future: At present, the political horizon looks uncertain. The extended deadline for completing the work for the constitution ends in two weeks. All indications spell that the CA is likely to vote to extend its term by six months to a year. Some speculate that the proposed extension may even be indefinite.

In any case we will be stuck with what will not be an elected CA, but a rogously runaway CA controlled by a few party netas who are clever enough to mouth all the right words about inclusive democracy. Despite progressive-sounding pronouncements, these netas remain a class apart: they continue to take a lion’s share of credit for the success of fading-from-the-memory past andolan; they are seemingly accountable to no one; and their modus operandi is about keeping all decisions uncertain so that they alone are seen as the ‘deciders’ of Nepali democracy.

The protest tomorrow must talk about how Nepal’s future is bleak when the signals from the Kathmandu-centric political class remain muddled. In times of prolonged uncertainty, investors hesitate to buy, educated professionals emigrate, and marginalised Nepalis are left voiceless due to the partisanship of their local reps. We must not let each CA member continue to draw over Rs 50,000 of the taxpayers’ money every month in cash and benefits without delivering.

Next generation: It’s cliché that the Nepali population is young. 15 million out of 30 million Nepalis are 21 or younger. Yet Nepal’s political discourse has never been about generational aspirations. What does the youth want to see in its future? And how can a new constitution help? These questions never figure into public discussions.

Tomorrow, the protestors must articulate their ideals for a future Nepal. Once this vision is engrained, then we can deliberate on what sorts of constitutional liberties and safeguards and checks and balances to write. Only then, the demand for a constitution will make sense.

A costly constitution

Taxpayers must demand the CA their money’s worth

BIZ BRIEFS

Celebration

KIST Bank celebrated its ninth anniversary with blood donation program at its central office and four of its branches. The bank also organised clean up activities.

Check-up

Advanced Poly Clinic is celebrating the opening of its Pokhara branch by conducting a free health camp from 15-21 May. The camp will offer multiple specialties including OPD check up, blood sugar, cholesterol, ECG and blood pressure measurement.

Happy lions

The Lion Corporation Japan, Lion Corporation (Thailand) and Nepal Thailand Trade Corporation jointly launched the Lion Products in the Nepalese market. Their products include personal care products, OTC medicines and functional foods.

Stylish Nima

Nima Rumba has released a new album, ‘PROstyle Rangaun Ki Ma..’ and PROstyle is promoting its ambassador by running a contest in the musical program ‘PROstyle Music of Your Choice’ of Image Channel. Lucky callers will get a chance to dine with Nima, get his autographed album and also win a bumper prizes worth NPR 40,000.
Thapa Nath Khanal’s days as prime minister seem to be numbered. If indications from leaders of the Unified Communist Party of Nepal, the Nepali Congress and the CPN-UML are real, we shall soon see a new government.

But would it be backed by a national consensus, which has been elusive since the election of the Constituent Assembly in 2008? Time will tell, but leaders say there is no other alternative. Whether Khanal stays or goes is immaterial. In any case, he hasn’t done anything so far to inspire confidence in his leadership. So the all-important question, again, is whether the two principal architects of the peace process since 2005, the NC and the Maoists, reach a consensus.

The NC has demanded, and rightly so, that the Maoists first deliver on their promises vis-a-vis a peace process without delaying the integration and rehabilitation of Maoist combatants. Also reasonable is the NC’s insistence on a lateral agreement on the new constitution. Supremacy of the constitution and constitutionalism (against parliamentary supremacy), periodic elections, independence of the judiciary, free press and pluralism – plus, an apolitical national army – would guarantee a democratic constitution. There cannot be any compromise on these principles, however much the Maoists insist on diluting them.

The Maoist leadership believes that they have given too much but fail to acknowledge the success of an abolished monarchy, an elected Constituent Assembly, and a secularised state. The leadership continues to sell to its cadre the impossible dream of complete revolution (a euphemism for state capture and one-party rule).

However, the NC, too, needs to make its own concessions. The form of governance need not be a Westminster-style parliament as the NC insists, arguing that a system of a directly-elected head of government would make the country more vulnerable to a one-party takeover. If the principles mentioned above are ensured, dictatorial ambitions can be foiled. And if watchdog institutions that ensure check and balance are weak, it wouldn’t stop a party with authoritarian ambitions from being stupid.

The NC can also make a compromise on the electoral system. The NC has pressed for a first-past-the-post system (where a candidate with the highest number of votes in a constituency is elected) and has only grudgingly accepted the principle of proportional representation under a mixed electoral system.

But the truth is that some form of proportional representation would ensure that smaller parties are heard. Of course, there are risks. Recently, four lawmakers – lone representatives of their respective parties or independent – are attempting to paralyse parliament. But not doing so would only further fuel the disenchantment of smaller parties with the system.

The result of the recent elections in Singapore should be enough to quiet those who oppose a proportional representation system. The opposition there has managed to get nearly 40 per cent of the total votes cast and has only six seats (an improvement from past elections) in the 87-member parliament.

So in fact, the NC could demonstrate flexibility on the forms of government and its elections without compromising the fundamentals of democracy.
Krishna Gopal Ranjit rifles through his closet and pulls out a canvass, on which an explosion of light radiates from its center forming a galactic soup of colour. On a second panel a maelstrom of apocalyptic proportions swallows buildings of historical and religious importance.

"Man will destroy nature," the 75-year-old landscape artist says in a frank and almost prophetic tone. The paintings constitute part of a series set to debut on World Environment Day, 5 June, at Fusion Studio in Thamel.

The Kathmandu artist, industry like the then Royal Nepal Airlines, for which he designed everything, from brochures and logos to hoarding boards and airplanes, all by hand. "When we're born, the first thing we do is cry for our mothers. This is at the heart of commerce, the human relationship," he remarks half-jokingly. With no formal education, Ranjit mastered his craft out of survival, an impetus that instigated a lifetime of trial and error—a fact no more evident than in a visit to his workshop.

More laboratory than atelier, Ranjit’s workspace is replete with oddities invented and fine-tuned for his own use: toothpaste tubes of acrylic coded according to hue, mini spatulas fashioned from old toothbrushes, hair dryers for blowing drops of paint across a surface and needleless syringes perfect for penning a steady flow.

"It’s hard to get a misty layer. There’s a risk of producing something really dull," says Bibha Shrestha, curator at Fusion Studio. "Most people don’t know about Krishna Ranjit’s talent beyond his work on mountains. In fact, he’s constantly challenging himself with what he can do next. Even without a standard education, his techniques are bold and confident."

Aficionados may find the eschatological theme in his upcoming series a bit exaggerated and typical of the times, but when juxtaposed with his entire canon of art, one can only appreciate his drastic shift as a beacon call to action. By his brush, hair dryer, syringe, and smoke, Ranjit draws awareness to the global environmental crisis.

"Revival," an alternating exhibition of previous works by Ranjit, will show until the opening of his new series on 5 June at Fusion Studio in Thamel.
Kizauna a message of hope

To show solidarity with Japan’s children, UNESCO is organising a Post Card writing campaign. School children are requested to write a message of hope on a postcard. The aim is to deliver a post card to each of the thousands of children who were affected by the earthquake and subsequent Tsunami in Japan on 11 March to remind them that they haven’t been forgotten. The Sendai branch of the National Federal of UNESCO Associations in Japan (NFUJA) will collect the post cards and then distribute it to the school children. Post cards should be sent before July 31, 2011 and addressed to:

Sendai UNESCO Association, 1-2-2, Oomachi, Aba-ku
Sendai City, 980-8604, Japan

Post cards can also be sent via the UNESCO office in Kathmandu (PO Box 14391, Sanepa-2, Lalipur)
When reviewing a local eatery, I usually make it a point not to alert the restaurant of my eventual write up. But this time, in hopes to score a free slice of the legendary Chocolate Love cake at the Snowman Café in Jhochhen, I made my mission loud and clear.

Fittingly named, the Chocolate Love cake evokes homemade tenderness that even widowed grandmothers would pine for. Not too cakey and far from fluff, it strikes a perfect balance between its baked chocolate layer and its whipped choco-mallow topping.

Owner Ram Prasad Manandhar and his baker wife Mathura Devi have been letting Kathmandu eat cake since 1965. Like many of my favored joints, the Snowman’s exterior is quite deceiving, and its sign isn’t so original. Inside, however, is a two-story hangout equally popular with travelers and locals, evidently decorated when free love reigned, a naughty poster of Sigmund Freud and the essential photo of Bob Marley hang above. But if you’re not into the hippie scene, don’t be repelled, takeout and special orders are common.

The Chocolate Love Cake, among other worthy contenders like the Cream Caramel, Black Forest or the Chocolate Banana Cake, is baked fresh daily and sits on a windowsill tempting passersby. So if you decide to visit the Snowman Café and regretfully decide to share a slice, make sure you fork the delicate cake top-down.

No WiFi or Illy here, it’s all about the cake.

MARCUS BENIGNO

Let us eat cake

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MARCUS BENIGNO

Sing Ma Food Court

One of the pioneers of the Jhamel scene, Sing Ma Food Court has remained resolutely uncool through the years. Despite refraining from venturing into the upmarket dinner and drinks segment, however, this purveyor of Singaporean-Malay fare is thriving. Unlike many of the other trendy restobars that litter Jhamel, Sing Ma is never empty, and has even opened a branch in Bhatbhateni.

The reason is simple. What Sing Ma sacrifices in ambience it more than makes up for with its rapid service and cheap and delicious food. With a range of rice, roti and noodle combos available for Rs 150-250, Sing Ma redefines the notion of fast food in Nepal, and challenges the dullards who subsist on what passes for chowmein and fried rice here to open their senses to the street cuisine of the dragon city.

This cuisine is a reflection of Singapore itself, where Chinese, Malay and Indian cultures combine in what the hawkers serve up. Sing Ma tries its best to encompass that range. The result can be disorienting, as you dip a Malay-style roti into a rich, Indian-inflected gravy, take a luscious bite of tender Rendang fillet, slurp up some Cantonese fried noodles, and clear your sinuses with a fiery dose of Tom Yam soup. Before you dive into culinary confusion, I recommend the comforting mornoesque pork Cha Siew Mae, which in its savoury sweetness turns out to be something altogether. Sing Ma also does an excellent job of incorporating vegetables and tofu into its dishes rather than as token sides. The brinjal and tofu combos work very well, and you’ll have no problems finishing your greens when they come in the form of crunchy, stir-fried pak choi.

In lieu of beer, I suggest you wash this all down with an iced sour plum juice, and if you still have space, Sing Ma does a good selection of cheesecakes, too.

Nepali Kukur
Ozone over Everest

Amazingly, pollution-related ozone concentrations in the Mount Everest region are reported to be very high as shown by John Semple, colleagues from the University of Toronto in a 2009 March issue of the New England Medical Journal. This is potentially alarming because death rates from respiratory causes are associated with increasing concentrations of ozone. The Mount Everest region is somewhere you can inhale deeply without feeling a burning throat sensation as you do when you complete such a manoeuvre in Kathmandu. But if the ozone story is true, our lungs may be in for a rough ride even in the pristine Solukhumbu Valley.

Ozone concentrations in the troposphere have doubled globally since pre-industrial times. They are now 30 ppb from estimates of 15 ppb in the pre-industrial era. And, not surprisingly, the major reason for this is burning of fossil fuel. (Not to be confused with the stratospheric ozone layer which protects the planet from harmful ultraviolet rays from the sun.)

This is potentially a “double whammy” situation for the villages in Solu Khumbu region. Researchers have long known the risks of indoor stoves without chimneys that are used in Nepal. The risks are pneumonia in children, chronic lung and heart diseases in adults, and even lung cancer. Many people suffer from these illnesses and die young. Clean burning stoves with functioning chimneys, and social acceptance of these kitchen changes would go a long way in addressing this neglected area of public health in Nepal.

The April-May dry season this year has been unusually wet. In fact, it already feels like the monsoon, but we don’t hear anyone complaining. Loadshedding hours have gone down and farmers are happy. The reason for the unusual precipitation is the consistently large infusion of moisture that blow up, cool and fall as rain. This satellite picture taken on Thursday shows the cloud cover restricted to the mountains, the plains are bathed in haze and dry. This trend will continue into the weekend.

If more studies on ozone levels in Solukhumbu confirm the findings that Semple and colleague have clearly demonstrated, our government will need to bring this matter up in world fora so that people can at least begin to think what the practical solutions may be. But in the meantime, replacement of old stoves by clean burning ones is something that is an eminently “doable” project that will save thousands of lives even as we tackle the potentially more complicated problem of trans-boundary ozone pollution in the Himalaya.

SNV Netherlands Development Organisation is a leading international organisation that specialises in capacity development support for government, non-government and private sector organisations. SNV is committed to reduction of poverty through nationally defined poverty reduction strategies and the global MDG agenda. In Asia, SNV is active in Nepal, Bhutan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan and provides advisory services in Agriculture, WASH and Renewable Energy sectors.

Within the framework of the European Commission (EC) funded programme “Developing Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Methodologies and Services for the Informal Economy”, SNV is currently implementing the High Impact Tourism Training for Jobs & Income (HITT) programme.

The HITT programme, aims to contribute to sustainable, scalable, pro-poor economic growth in 4 Sub-Saharan countries (Benin, Mali, Ghana and Mozambique) and 3 countries in Asia (Cambodia, Nepal and Vietnam) through the development and implementation of integrated, market-driven tourism TVET system targeting the informal economy. More specifically, the HITT programme aims to expand access for disadvantaged groups (in particular women, youth, under skilled and semi skilled) to practical and market-oriented vocational training and facilitate direct links with the tourism industry to maximise income and employment opportunities for participants. SNV Nepal is responsible to manage the programme component for Nepal.

SNV requests a Nepali based international consultant to submit an application for:

Supporting the Implementation of the High Impact Tourism Training Programme in Nepal

The primary objective of the assignment is to assist the HITT Nepal programme team in executing activities planned under the Implementation Phase of the HITT programme and in particular support the implementation of the human resource development component of the programme.

Requirements
- Minimum of 5 years professional experience in human resource development, with preference to those with experience in the provision of TVET for the informal economy and/or the tourism sector
- Proven ability to work together with private sector and public stakeholders
- Fluency in written and spoken English & excellent communication skills
- An experienced, strong team player with excellent interpersonal skills
- Demonstrable cross-cultural negotiation, leadership team building and programme management skills

Detailed TOR is available at: http://www.snvworld.org/en/countries/nepal/jobs/socialvocancies/Pages/default.aspx

Interested individuals/organisations are required to submit a letter of interest, a copy of lead CV including a daily rate by 20th May 2011 in the address mentioned below.

SNV Netherlands Development Organisation Nepal
Bhaktapur, Lalitpur
P.O.Box 166, Kathmandu, Nepal
www.snvworld.org

MOVE WITH THE TIMES: Prime Minister Jhal Nath Khanal cut short his visit to the conference of Least Developed Countries because of the political crisis in Kathmandu.

DEEPENDRA BAJRACHARYA

A high pollution area threatens the Mount Everest region. The green area denotes ozone-rich air migrating from industries in the neighbourhood in 2007. The thick black line encircles the Tibetan plateau and X indicates Mount Everest.

The golden end: A rainbow arches over the Swayambhu Nath stupa after thunder showers on Wednesday.

MIN RATNA BAJRACHARYA

PANORAMIC VIEW: Photographer Mukunda Bahadur Shrestha, 82, discusses a panorama of Kathmandu Valley he took in 1959 with anthropologist professor John F Fisher at the School of Creative Communications in Kathmandu on Tuesday.

AMIT HATHNAGARATRA

GOLDEN END: A rainbow arches over the Swayambhu Nath stupa after thunder showers on Wednesday.
At the beginning of Arranged Marriage, a story from Rabi Thapa's first collection Nothing to Declare, a grandmother tells her narrator grandson 'oranges are only good when they're ripe', alluding to the importance of young marriage. The narrator replies 'Do I look like an orange'. The joke works, like so much of Monty Python, on the disregard of the metaphorical for the literal, making what was said appear absurd. Thapa draws on dislocation to represent the cultural ground currently changing in Nepali society.

In many ways the protagonist is Kathmandu. A central story, From the Road, is a series of snapshots of Nepali life. The narrator, a Nepali travelling abroad, recollects 'the ceremonial run-up to Dashain' and, having described the events, ponders 'What does it mean that I have willingly joined in these rituals when I do not believe they are any more than just that?' The question resounds throughout the stories, seeking to gain perspective to form an answer.

Thapa has written, "... in writing about my places of Kathmandu valley, I sustain them, bring them out from under the rubble, and string them together." The collection seems to document Kathmandu, not in an attempt to hold onto the past, but in an attempt to collect and understand it for future and present generations. Aryaghat, a story about a cousin who commits suicide in the USA and whose ashes are brought for dispersal in the Bagmati, examines the loss of Nepali individuality. The narrator neither knows nor understands his cousin or his own parents.

There are moments of beautiful writing (see the conflict inherent in 'The dust of decades inside made me wheeze' looking at an ancestral home; 'Time folded into itself, the cycles of rice and dal as night and day', with its Asian Proustian feel; 'frames of time-softened carving'). Laudable too are the innovations of language and structure – often a compounding of new and old. The styles range from the mythical (Valley of Tears) to simple 3rd person linear (Tiger!) to emails lined up in a diary form (Arranged Marriage); locals sing not Resham Phiriri but a 'famously camp disco refrain'; taxi drivers 'vocalise their insistent tooting'; note the subtlety of the final image of Swayambhu, '... the eyes of truth painted on the crown gazed impassively...'.

Some stories however feel predetermined, as though almost journalistic, and contradictory to a living fiction. A writer who breaks into an otherwise objective scene ('The place [a dance bar] is almost full, not bad for a Thursday night.') suggests a lack of respect for the reader. More irritating is the lazy phrasing that appears. Compare the simplicity of the mountains after the rain 'soft to the eyes' with 'It was funny how it alternatively pissed you off, bored you, amused you' or 'chasing down the usual suspects with more than usual fervour'. Third person works better than first. The 'I' of Arranged Marriage is not totally convincing. A Night Out in Kathmandu and After Party generate limited sympathy for the characters largely because they are sketches. In Desire the pace is initially strong but the ending feels forced and reliant on exposition.

But I feel Nothing to Declare is an important step for Nepali literature in English. It attempts to look at the conflicts and striations of this country and tries to find ways of seeing them afresh. And for this, the gripes are outweighed by the success. At the end of Aryaghat, the sad grotesqueness of 'Come on, take photos!' for bereaved but absent parents still in the US is counterpoised with a scavenging boy who gets shooed away only to return. The story ends with the image of this boy, with 'black, heavy-framed spectacles' he's taken from the river, 'peering at us from behind them'. The glasses of the dead are used and perpetuated by a carrion-like living. I wonder what he sees.
Ever since Henry Kissinger described it as a “basket case” and Joan Baez sang her sombre ballad about a million dead, Bangladesh has suffered an image problem. But, largely unnoticed by the outside world and even in its South Asian neighbourhood, the country has in recent years taken dramatic strides to raise living standards of its 162 million people. Bangladesh has gone from an aid-dependent to a trade-dependent country—ten years ago, foreign aid made up 10 per cent of Bangladesh’s GDP, now it is a mere 2 per cent. Exports of textile and garments, and now shipbuilding and pharmaceuticals bring in $25 billion a year.

At independence in 1971, 80 per cent of Bangladeshis lived below the poverty line, it is now down to 32 per cent. The country feels itself even though population has nearly doubled in the past 40 years. Bangladesh may still lag in GDP per capita, but it is much further ahead in terms of human development indicators than India and the country it was once a part of, Pakistan.

“It is to the huge credit of Bangladesh that despite the adversity of low income it has been able to do so much so quickly,” says economist Amartya Sen, who adds that this is because of the work of non-profits like Grameen, BRAC and Proshika and committed public policies of successive governments. The lesson for Nepal is that Bangladeshi politics until recently was also hopelessly stuck because of the “battle of the begums”, but this instability was not allowed to affect economic and trade policies. Investment in education, health and basic services continued despite post-1990 party politics being as short-sighted as ours. However, Bangladeshi democracy remains flawless, and proof of that is the way the Nobel Peace Prize winner and founder of Grameen Bank, Mohammad Yunus, is being hounded by the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Yunus has been forced out of the micro-credit bank he set up and vilified in a government orchestrated campaign, all because he said he nearly set up his own political party.

Bangladesh’s enviable achievements in education, health and agriculture present strong models for us. Nepal’s prime minister hasn’t been able to complete his cabinet in three months and it has only one woman. Bangladesh’s prime minister, finance minister, agriculture minister, home minister and leader of the opposition are all women. The government’s policies dove-tail with the work of Grameen and other NGOs in reducing poverty.

“We still have poverty, but the nature of poverty has changed,” explains Shabeen Anam of the non-profit Manushi Janno, “people don’t die of hunger anymore but there is a malnutrition problem. There is high enrolment but the dropout rate is still high. Our family planning was a success but we took our eyes off the ball, population is re-emerging with a vengeance because of premature policy changes.”

Geo-politically, Bangladeshi strategists seem to have decided that it is better to engage with India than to bait the giant neighbour. In early 2010, newly-elected Sheikh Hasina signed an agreement with Manmohan Singh under which Bangladesh will allow transit through its territory to the Indian northeast and India will open up its huge market for Bangladeshi exports.

“There are political parties in South Asia that define themselves by their relations with India, they make their livelihood by being anti-Indian,” says economist Rehman Sobhan, “we need to move on from treating big brother like step brother to a fairy god-brother.”

Dhaka’s glittering new highrises are symbolic of this country’s soaring ambition to break out of its image of a poverty-stricken country. Businessmen are upbeat, and there is optimism here about the future. Much more than in Kathmandu, you get a sense here that everyone is pulling in the same direction.

Debopriyo Bhattacharya of the Centre for Policy Dialogue in Dhaka says Bangladesh is like a jumbo jet that is revving up its engines. He says: “All we need now is a runway.”
Economic growth is not enough to fight poverty

More than 200,000 people in India die annually from malaria, mainly in poor regions. And, while much of the existing international health-care assistance is focused on sub-Saharan Africa, India, along with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, are just as devastated by neglected tropical diseases. Indeed, India alone accounts for one-quarter of intestinal worm infections worldwide and more than one-half of all cases of elephantiasis, leprosy, and visceral leishmaniasis.

Although gender parity in primary education has improved in the subcontinent, dropout rates for girls are higher than for boys. The dowry tradition puts pressure on girls’ families to marry them early, leading to a preference for sons, and thus to sex-specific abortions targeting female fetuses. Legislation, courts, and law-enforcement mechanisms have failed to address the high incidence of violence against women. Death rates for young girls are much higher than for boys.

The paradox of South Asia is that growth has been instrumental in reducing poverty and improving health indicators, yet social development has not kept up with income growth. Income growth has been instrumental in reducing poverty and improving education has improved in the subcontinent, dropout rates for girls are higher than for boys. The dowry tradition puts pressure on girls’ families to marry them early, leading to a preference for sons, and thus to sex-specific abortions targeting female fetuses. Legislation, courts, and law-enforcement mechanisms have failed to address the high incidence of violence against women. Death rates for young girls are much higher than for boys.

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Nor have health indicators kept up with income growth. South Asia has the world’s highest rates of malnutrition and the largest number of undernourished children, who have higher mortality rates, lower cognitive performance, and a greater likelihood of dropping out of school.

In South Asia the poverty rate fell from 60 per cent in 1981 to 40 per cent in 2005, but fast enough given population growth, to reduce the total number of poor people. In fact, the number of poor people in South Asia increased from 549 million in 1981 to 595 million in 2005, and from 420 million to 455 million in India, where almost three-quarters of the region’s poor reside.

India has experienced slower income growth than China, which partly explains its higher poverty rate. But a country’s poverty rate also depends on the degree of income inequality, a reduction in which makes growth more pro-poor, and inequality in China has, in fact, increased more rapidly than in India. So a rising tide really can lift all boats, with growth trumping inequality when it comes to poverty reduction.

Moreover, income growth has contributed to improved health. More than 200,000 people in India die annually from malaria, mainly in poor regions. And, while much of the existing international health-care assistance is focused on sub-Saharan Africa, India, along with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, are just as devastated by neglected tropical diseases. Indeed, India alone accounts for one-quarter of intestinal worm infections worldwide and more than one-half of all cases of elephantiasis, leprosy, and visceral leishmaniasis.

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The paradox of South Asia is that growth has been instrumental in reducing poverty and improving social outcomes, but poverty rates and social outcomes have not improved fast enough to reduce the total number of people living in misery. As a result, policymakers should begin to consider direct policy interventions to accelerate social progress, with a particular focus on human development and gender inclusiveness.

In today’s uncertain world, social turmoil, gender deprivation, and rising conflict have tested countries’ abilities to create jobs, promote gender equity, equip young people with skills, and design effective social protection programs. Tackling these challenges requires a clear understanding of how economic opportunities can be broadened to ensure faster poverty reduction, promote human development, and stimulate gender-inclusive growth.

Greater gender equality can contribute to economic growth and development, and major initiatives to increase opportunities for women can transform society. If more girls had gone to school a generation ago, millions of infant deaths could have been averted each year, and tens of millions of families could have been more educated, healthier, and happier.

Deeper social disparities should never be viewed as the inevitable price of rapid growth, and more egalitarian outcomes in education, health, and gender should not be considered ‘second-stage’ reforms. A development strategy that promotes growth first, and only then deals with human misery, is not sustainable. Policies designed to make redistribution more efficient need not hamper growth itself.

Ejaz Ghani is Economic Adviser on South Asia Poverty Reduction and Economic Management at the World Bank and editor of The Poor Half

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Billion in South Asia: What is Holding Itself.

Project Syndicate
Choosing public schools

Sher bahadur KC in Nagarik, 1 May

Parents usually prefer sending their kids to private schools for quality education. But public schools in Butwal have established a reputation for being the first choice for parents. Govinda Gyawali, principal of Kanti Higher Secondary School in Ward 6 of Butwal, has been overwhelmed by the number of parents seeking admissions for their children at the school, which provides free education in English. “We had to send back many parents this time, but we have assured them that we will develop our infrastructure and increase our capacity for next year,” he said.

According to the District Education Office, around two hundred community schools in the district have started English instruction. Principal of Shanti Model Secondary School in Manigram says that 225 students from various private schools have taken admissions at the school this year. Keshab Bhandari from Karahiya, who took his son out of a private school and admitted him at Shanti Model, says that both he and his son are happy since the school provides education in English like private schools but at a much cheaper price. Unlike Kanti, which raises funds by renting out space in its building, Shanti Model does not have internal sources to sustain itself. So the school charges a nominal fee to meet its costs which is comparatively much lesser than what the private schools in the area charge.

Ultimately, Gyawali feels that public schools have to maintain a high quality of education if they want to compete with the private schools.

Don't miss the chance

Letter to the editor by Shiva Raj Bhandari (Dolakha) in Nagarparkar, 9 May

Maoist chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal has once again distanced himself from the Sadhukha. His commitment to peace and constitution building is trustworthy then we have overcome a big hurdle. But going by Dahal’s track record, we cannot be relaxed as yet. If we set aside the distractions, the peace process and constitution making are certainly on track. After much hostility, cooperation and coexistence among parties, their leaders and cadres is a positive change.

The 1991 constitution was drafted in six months because of honest leaders like Manmohan Adhikari and Madan Bhandari on one side and sacrificing leaders like Krishna Prasad Bhattarai and Ganesh Man Singh on the other. If the parties sincerely work to preserve the achievements of the Jana Andolan, then 2011 will be a landmark in Nepali history. Although the last three years have been spent in petty politicking among the parties, it has been significant when we consider the lessons learnt. The 17 rounds of PM election must have taught the parties that they alone cannot influence Nepali politics. The NC and the UML have to understand that they are in the same boat. The culture of betraying and backstabbing has to end and the parties need to re-establish their lost credibility. The onus is on the Maoists, otherwise there is a real danger of squandering this historic opportunity.
Fifty-five-year-old Madan Ray of Chandragadi, Jhapa is bitter about the way politicians have put their interest above national interest. “Political leaders are engaged in their personal battles, nobody gives a damn about how we live,” he says. He thinks the lack of agreement among the leaders has put the CA in crisis. “If only they were sincere, life would be much better for the twenty-five million.”

Chandika Prasad Bhurtel, 71, says he is not sure the constitution will be endorsed by 28 May, even if the political parties reach a consensus. “If the parties use the 1990 Constitution as a framework and incorporate the achievements of the Jana Andolan, a new constitution is possible within two days,” he says. He sees the Maoists’ reluctance to part with its army as the major hurdle.

Krishna Tuladhar, 30, says five development regions should be developed as federal states since they accommodate all castes and culture in a mixed geography. “We should not make the mistake of creating federal states along ethnic lines,” he insists.

Forty-one-year-old Lila Prasad Tamang of Urlabari in Morang is afraid the country will fragment. “The country will split into small kingdoms like in the past if the federal structure is decided on the basis of ethnicity,” she adds.

Tara Adhikari, 35 of Bhadrapur and Mina Pokharel, 22, of Sunsari are more worried about inflation than the country’s political situation. “We had high expectation after the success of Jana Andolan, but things have just gotten worse,” says Mina. Pooja Silwal, 25, of Urlabari says she had pinned her hope on the Maoists and voted for them in the CA election, but she adds: “They have forgotten us and now are behaving like all the others.”

Dipak Bohora, 30, of Itahari is also frustrated with the way Maoists have been unable to transform themselves into a democratic party. “If they continue to keep arms the country will become like Afghanistan, and no one will be able to do anything about it, least of all the Maoists.”
This week we take a look at actual headlines from the national press and try to read between the lines.

Chhetris Declare Band
It was bound to happen sooner or later. Nepal’s warrior caste closed down half the country on Tuesday, declaring it a Chhetri Chhetra. Friday the Federalist Janjatis (which this week lost its donor funding) have their own banned. Now comes news that Bahuns also claim to be Janjatis because, according to some guesstimates, they settled in Nepal long before, let’s say, the Sherpas. If the Chhetris have their own province, the Bahuns and Dalits will be the only ones without a geographically-defined state of their own, and under Nepal’s new constitution can claim inclusive rights. Right?

China upset over Taiwan Deal
It better be. Two months after reaffirming vows to its one-China policy, the JN govt goes off to coochi-coochi-coo with the renegade state and signs an anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism bilateral. This memorandum of understanding is even more inexplicable than making Larkya Lama a short-lived minister. What kind of money launderers and terrorists does Taipei want extradited from Kathmandu anyway? And we hear on the grapevine that even angrier over this than China is India, which has been trying unsuccessfully to get successive govts in Kathmandu sign an extradition deal.

Role reversals
The Madhesi parties and dons of the Kathmandu underworld seem to be on role reversal mode. Messrs Ganesh and Abhisek Lama are hobnobbing with Madhesi parties while Madhesi lawmakers are enjoying a much-deserved rest in various jails. Not that it made much a diff to the dons because their cell phones so extortion, assassinations and business went on as usual. After Gayatri Shah and BP Yadav, six more lawmakers are headed for the can. The malicious, meanwhile, are seen grading public meetings and rallies while the lawmakers expand their constituency among fellow-jailbirds. After Gayatri Shah and BP Yadav, six more lawmakers are headed for the can. The malicious, meanwhile, are seen grading public meetings and rallies while the lawmakers expand their constituency among fellow-jailbirds who can be useful later on in their political careers as muscle-for-rent. Only a question of time, therefore, before Chari delivers an address to the nation televised live from his jail cell. Meanwhile, soon-to-expire CA members are experimenting with gender role reversals. A lady lawmaker got drunk and man-handling her husband in public, ensuring proportional representation in all state activities, and getting even for centuries of oppression.

NOC’s Evaporation Loss
No wonder our state oil monopoly is bankrupt. Every tanker ferrying kerosene, petrol and diesel into Kathmandu is allowed 200 litres for evaporation loss. Even when the ambient temperature is 50 Celsius, petroleum doesn’t vaporise at that rate. But that hasn’t deterred the men from the Ministry of Under-Supply, the Nepal Oil Corruption, and the Tanker Drivers’ Cartel all taking their cut from the Rs 9 karod of petrol that is written off every month as evaporation loss. All this is perfectly above board and legal. And the reason there is a power shortage? All NEA staff are allowed 120 units a month for free, and the public has taken its cue with 40 per cent of all power consumers in this country not paying for it. Tip of the Day: Another place to escape load shedding is Lazimpat, along the road where there are two important embassies and the vice president’s official residence.

Minister Attends Queen’s Birthday
Not Nepal’s ex-queen, Britain’s Queen Liz II. Bharat Mohan Uncle stood in tottering attention during the ‘God Save the Queen’, but couldn’t help breaking into a wide grin and tap dance through our very own “Sayaun Thunga Fool Ka Hami”. Our new national anthem is definitely less boring than “God Save but “Resham Firiri” would have been even jaunter.