With only three weeks to go for the constitution deadline, there is an ominous sense of foreboding about where we are headed. The terrorist attack in Janakpur in which Madhesis killed Madhesis and the double-barrelled strike that has shut off one-fourth of the country’s territory in the Far West for a week now, indicates what we are up against: competing ethnicities within proposed future federal units resorting to violence. Only if politicians treat Nepal like a rainbow nation of multiple ethnicities will we avert a national tragedy.

GUEST COLUMN
by Alok Kumar Bohara
Nepal’s political leaders could learn from chimpanzees who show greater enlightened self-interest that comes from cooperation.

THIS IS IT
by Rubeena Mahato
Us-vs-them ethno-chaunsim is drowning out the moderate, sane and rational voices.

BY THE WAY
by Anurag Acharya
It may sound like an oxymoron, but only rational politics can defuse the country’s ethnic time bomb.

POKHARA PACKAGE
Pokhara survived the insurgency, political instability and frequent strikes. With polls looking up, tourism has rebounded.
In the tinder dry terrain of Nepal's political summer, the conditions are right for a blaze that could rapidly engulf the whole country.

To save the country from possible disintegration. But everyday we see new proof of the main political actors not being able to stand up to ethnic blackmail by powerful satraps. Others are actively using the ethnic and regional card to settle political scores, and for electoral advantage in future - the country be damned.

We need a go-op ed writer to see that carving up the country into states named after ethnic groups will not address historical marginalisation, but fracture the country along ethnic faultlines. None of the models proposed so far will make all ethnic groups happy, everyone will feel they have been shortchanged.

Fortunately, just in the nick of time, saner minds and cooler heads have prevailed. Brokered closely by India, a deal has been worked out for a unity government paving the way for a NC-led government by 27 May. But even if there is a consensus government, how does that guarantee a consensus on the contentious clauses in the constitution? In fact, a ministerial reshuffle will unleash the usual haggling over portfolios and distract everyone's attention from the urgent task of writing a least harmful constitution. If the past is any guide, there will be a singular lack of statesmanship during the give-and-take of government formation.

The political leaders who ultimately should be concerned about national unity and long-term stability are being swayed by non-government pressure groups and abetted in the past by Nepal-based internationals in the name of equalising opportunity. It has now gone beyond the ability of the politicians to control cross-party divisions in their ranks.

These sensitive and volatile issues should have been debated and sorted out in the last three years. But the leaders, in their infinite wisdom, have left the most intractable aspects of the constitution till the last three weeks.

You can't order federalism express delivery. Democracy and national unity are absolutes. You can't be half-democratic, or half-united. If the Indian parliament proved anything, it is that政协 is appeasement and short-term political expediency invite long-term disaster.
that promoted cooperation because the ones who worked together survived better than those who behaved selfishly. The federal structure models promoted by the three main parties show how short-sighted and narrow-minded Nepal’s political leadership continues to be. The NC’s seven state model, the UML’s seven or 12 state model (they have left it undefined in classic flip-flop style) and the Maoists’ ten-state model are all outcomes of closed door meetings. The past three years of consultations, suggestions from public hearings, and advice of experts have all been ignored.

None of the three proposals take into account the emerging regional economic and geopolitical realities and the comparative advantages of our landscape, people, and resources. The separation of the Tarai from its natural watershed would be uncompetitive and counterproductive for the Madhesis themselves.

The Tarai just has one resource base: agriculture, whereas the hills and mountains have diverse cash crops, tourism, hydropower and water. The hills and plains also suffer from soil erosion and flooding, and if these two regions are together they will improve their bargaining position vis-à-vis the downstream Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

The clamour for identity is a result of the historical marginalisation of Nepal’s diverse ethnicities, but in addressing this grievance the proponents of ethnicity-based federalism are proposing to carve up the country into entities that will be economically unsustainable and lay the seeds for long-term inter-ethnic discord.

Nepal’s multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-ethnic mosaic is overlapped to such an extent that it is impossible to draw boundaries. If boundaries must be carved, they must reflect Nepal’s biological watershed of the four main rivers as the basis of decentralisation.

When the lowest bargaining position seems to be the seven-state model, it may be absurd to push for a four-state model, but that is the only model that will actually satisfy everyone. And such an economic cooperative model is the only one that will be viable.

This proposal encompasses ethnic sentiment as well as our need for economic integration by incorporating diverse resource bases and their comparative advantages by demarcating Karnali, Gandaki, Koshi, and Bagmati as the capitals of Kalinga, Madhesh, and Janakpur or Mithila province (the Koshi state). Dividing the Tarai into three sub-provinces could be formed within each of these states. A complete separation of the Tarai strip from the hills in forming a stand-alone province will have detrimental effects on the people of Tarai in the long run.

It makes very little sense to divide our natural poverty base while the rest of the world is moving towards forming economic communities. The Tarai is already densely populated and has reached the limits of its agricultural and natural resources. In 20 years, with no other resource to harness, this strip of land will likely turn into a spatial poverty trap. A stand-alone hilly region, on the other hand, will struggle with food deficits. Inhabitants of the hills are migrating out in record numbers to the Tarai plains and abroad. In the short run, the hilly regions will continue to suffer. Add to that the claims about river systems and flooding problems, and we are looking at a protracted water conflict and ethnic disharmony.

An ecologically balanced larger Karnali state, on the other hand, can be a powerhouse in producing protein through animal husbandry, whereas its Tarai section can still be a bread basket. The potential of this hill-plain, considering its combined cash crops (coffee, olives, herbs, spices, and vegetables) is unlimited.

The same argument applies to the other two Tarai provinces (Lambini sub-province within the larger Gandaki state, and Janakpur or Mithila province in the Koshi state). Dividing the Tarai into three sub-provinces and making each of them a part of the larger state entity is not the end of the world.

An economic unit from the mountains down to the plains will be a force to reckon with. A Koshi state will have stronger bargaining power than a strip of Tarai province.

A governance unit comprising the three ecological regions needs not be seen as anti-Pahal and anti-Madhes. Collectively, we can all be winners in the long-run, as Oscar the chimp instinctively came to learn.

Alok K Bohara, PhD is a professor at the University of New Mexico in the United States. bohara@unm.edu

Together we stand, #602
Equal opportunity poverty. # 318
Trailer of Chimpanzees

Enlightened
self-interest

Let’s learn from the chimpanzees, who cooperate to survive
Pokhara in the monsoon, #565
Pokhara as a sports hub, #284
Gross national happiness in Pokhara, #301

Paavan Mathema

I t is April-end and Pokhara is bustling with activity. Without a booking, you will be lucky to find a room even in a two-star hotel. The restaurants on Lakeside are busy, and the sky above Sarangkot is dotted with colourful paragliders every morning. Ultralights buzz the Peace Pagoda, and it is rush hour on Jomsom flights. Tourism and businesses are hopeful, exploring new investments.

Pokhara survived the insurgency, political instability and frequent bandas. With politics progressing favourably now, tourism has rebounded and businesses have picked up. Pokhara is cashing in not just as a base camp for trekkers to the Annapurnas and an appendage to Kathmandu, but is inventing new ways of becoming an internationally-recognised adventure destination on its own.

Few years ago, the city used to be closed during off seasons, but now it is a popular stop all year through for trekkers, honeymooners and for refugees from the capital who want a quick getaway. Chinese, Indian and local tourists have filled in the gaps. In fact, room occupancy by domestic travellers grew by 15 per cent this year, increasing the share of domestic tourism to 40 per cent. Pokhara has also seen a surge in free individual travellers (FITs), who usually spend more and stay longer than group travellers. Yoga and meditation tourism is also growing. The scenic city is selling not just nature’s offerings, but also developing into a health and education hub for the country. Banking and real estate industries have also recovered from the flight of Gurkha families and are taking off, reflecting the optimism in the market. The picture looks rosy. But ask any businessman in Pokhara and the common complaint is that Kathmandu has done absolutely nothing to support Pokhara’s development. The potholed highway that welcomes travellers into Pokhara is a testament to the lack of concern showed by the central government towards the city’s progress. The roads are bumpy too. There has hardly been any investment in infrastructure to push Pokhara forward. Plans for a new airport are finally taking shape after languishing for 35 years (see page 5). Problems of water scarcity and loadshedding plague businesses, increasing their overheads by over 50 per cent. New investors are nervous, as in the case of the paragliding industry which even after 13 years is not governed by specific regulations (see page 6). Although the security situation has improved, tourism entrepreneurs are not confident enough to venture too far from Lakeside. “The municipality doesn’t even regularly come to collect garbage,” says one hotelier. “It is useless to expect anything else from them. The government exists only to collect taxes.”

So the private sector is stepping forward. The “Jaun Hai Pokhara” campaign was successful in boosting domestic tourism. Following its lead, tourism entrepreneurs started “Chaliye Pokhara” campaign in Indian cities this year. Hoteliers now want Lakeside to be open 24 hours.

The central government can play an important role in easing operations for businesses and improving the investment environment. With over 300,000 tourists visiting Pokhara every year and development in other sectors, the city makes a significant contribution to the country’s economy. Pokhara has been the poster city for Nepal’s tourism for long. It’s payback time.
Finally, a new airport?

RAMESH POUDEL

A fter decades of slumber, the government seems to be finally moving on the construction of a new international airport in Pokhara. The current airport is woefully inadequate to handle tourism growth, but it cannot be expanded and its north-south runway cannot accommodate larger aircraft, because of mountains on both sides.

Six Chinese companies have bid for the construction of the airport, and one of them is sure to get the contract since the project will be funded by the Chinese Exim Bank and non-Chinese companies are not eligible. The government extended the bidding deadline by 10 days, and this expired on 27 April.

Pokhara’s new international airport has been a slogan for many politicians in elections past. Leaders who fly in from Kathmandu have never tired of promising Pokhara its airport.

Pokhara’s tourism businessmen have heard enough assurances and started lobbying directly with embassies in Kathmandu.

Land for the airport was acquired 38 years ago to the east of the city, but that is not going to be enough for longer runway and the extra area will cost Rs 4 billion to nationalise at current prices.

When built, Pokhara can have direct connections to regional hubs like New Delhi, Bangkok and Singapore, as well as serve as an alternative airport in case Kathmandu is closed. When built, Pokhara can be built quickest and for the least cost,” says former FNCCI chairman, Ananda Raj Mulmi. In a study in 1989, the Japanese aid agency, JICA had proposed a 2,500 m long and 50 m wide runway, but if Pokhara is to accommodate longer-range planes and be a real alternative to Kathmandu, it needs a runway of at least 3,300 m. The head of Civil Aviation Authority in Pokhara, Pratap Babu Towari, says the surrounding terrain means Pokhara will need the latest navigation and guidance systems for approach and departures.

Pokhara is in a race with Bhairawa and Nijgad to be the second international airport for Nepal, but local businessmen say Pokhara would make more sense because of its tourism potential, equidistance to Kathmandu and Lumbini and the relatively short period that construction will take.

CA member from Kaski, Rajkaji Gurung says: “We have now reached a point of no return for Pokhara’s new airport. It will be built sooner, rather than later.”

The queen of retreats

The challenge in deciding where to build a new hotel in Pokhara has always been to combine a mountain view with a lakefront location.

Lakeside lodges don’t have mountain scenery, while hotels like Shangrila and Fulbari that offer spectacular panoramas are situated a bit far from the lake. Pokhara Lodge is the classic example of a hotel that combines both: reflection of the Annapurnas and Machapuchare on the ripples of Phewa Lake.

Now comes Raniban Retreat, located next to the Peace Pagoda overlooking the city and lake, while offering a sweeping panorama from Dhaulagiri in the west to Himalchuli in the east. It is the ideal getaway for couples on honeymoon, a retreat for writers and artists in search of inspiration, or travellers who want to go nowhere other tourists go.

Located at nearly 1,500 m of altitude, Raniban also offers unimpeded tranquillity more reminiscent of off-the-beaten-track properties like Tiger Mountain. No traffic, no disco music, no street peddlers.

Raniban Retreat was first set up by a British investor and bought up by Nepal owners three years ago who remodeled and restructured the place. The upgraded retreat welcomed its first guests in December and business has picked up steadily as news of its charms spread by word of mouth.

Getting to Raniban Retreat is an adventure in itself. From Cheres Patan, guests can hire taxis or vans and drive up dusty gravel tracks. From the road, visitors have to climb a lengthy flight of stairs that leads to the resort. A boat ride across Phewa, and a one-half hour hike up Raniban forest also gets you there.

Raniban also gets brownie points for being an environmentally and socially conscious business with solar power and a biogas plant to turn waste into methane. Garteraker Himal, Baral explains, “We want to be a part of the landscape and not disturb nature.”

Surrounding villages benefit from the 10 km water pipeline built by the resort. Milk and spinach are bought from neighbouring farms and except for managers and staff, the housekeeping staff, manual labourers and guides who take guests on tours of villages are all locals.

The resort has 12 unique tents, three cottages, each furnished with double beds, and private attached bathrooms. But you can’t really get away from it all because the hotel has free wifi throughout.

http://www.raniban.com/
Not a smooth flight for paragliding enthusiasts in Nepal

Since the arrival of paragliding in Nepal in 1998, it has become one of the most lucrative tourist activities available in Pokhara. Sixteen paragliding companies operate in the valley, and on a good day, over 100 flights are in the air. Flying is open eight months in a year, rare for most spots in the world. “Pokhara has become a hotspot for paragliding because of favourable weather,” says Narayan Parajuli of Blue Sky Paragliding. “If there is an emergency situation, you can always land on the lake.”

Because of a lack of government action, the growth of paragliding in the country has stalled. Paragliding companies are grouped with commercial airlines, defined as air sport companies. Paragliding-specific guidelines or safety regulations have not yet been formulated in Nepal. “In the absence of government regulations, we have formed a Nepal Air Sports Association to self-monitor the quality of our services,” says Rajesh Bomjan of Sunrise Paragliding, who is Nepal’s first paragliding pilot. “But there is an urgent need for clear government policies in this sector.”

There are over 100 capable Nepali paragliding pilots, but less than a quarter of them are legally flying with foreign licenses. Nepali paragliding companies are forced to employ foreign pilots, and pay higher fees to get government approval for paragliding licences. “Nepali paragliding pilots, but less than a quarter of them are legally flying with foreign licenses. Nepali paragliding companies are forced to employ foreign pilots, and pay higher fees to get government approval for paragliding licences.”

Amphibian mountain flights

The company responsible for putting Pokhara on the international adventure sports map is still awaiting the green light for amphibious ultralight flights. Avia’s ultralights are popular among domestic and foreign tourists, but amphibious flights have not quite taken off. Avia ran successful test flights on Phewa in 2006 and examined the environmental impacts of landing planes on the lake. In 2011, the club shifted its focus to the more secluded Begnas Lake. But resistance from local fishermen and boating associations stalled hopes of any real progress. Praveen Gauchan of Avia Club says it is difficult coordinating with a lot of different interest groups. Fishermen and boatmen argue that landing on the lake will disrupt boating routes, increase pollution and kill fish, which Gauchan denies. Besides, he says, the Begnas area could benefit from overnight tourism. Avia says it is ready to pay a lake landing tax that will go to local communities, and local boats will be used to transfer guests.

Gauchan says Avia will persist and introduce the first amphibious ultralight flight in Nepal. He adds, “I will add another adventure to Pokhara, and perfectly combine its two main assets: the lakes and mountains.”
remuneration and fees. There is a clear need for an official means of certifying Nepal’s paragliding pilots. Unless government regulations are made, Nepali paragliding companies hang in the balance—unable to capitalise on the current boon of the sport. “Even after 13 years, nothing has changed,” says Basanta Rai Dawadi of Annapurna Paragliding. “The government has given nothing except the sky to promote this sport in Nepal.”

The continued craze for paragliding among foreigners and locals ensures a future for air sports in Nepal. More gliding spots are soon to be opened in Dharan, Lamjung, Gorkha and Bardia. The probability of other air sports like sky diving, para-trekking and paragliding, being imported is likely, considering the economic success of paragliding. If only the government’s support could keep pace with the air sport industry, small companies and employees might reap the benefits of this growing trend.

By the water

As the eastern lakefront of Pokhara gets saturated with hotels and restaurants and earns the moniker “Thamel by the Lake”, new hotels are springing up on the less crowded northern shore of Phewa.

One such is the Waterfront Resort which is situated amidst rice fields, and has a remote feel to it even though it is only a 15 minute walk from central lakeside. The property belongs to the KGH Group of hotels that is owned by environmentally, forester and best-selling author of self-improvement books, Karna Sakya. KGH stands for Kathmandu Guest House, the pioneering hotel that Sakya opened in 1977 that transformed Thamel into a tourist hub that it is today.

“You can learn everything if you can learn how to smile,” says Sakya, and smiling seems to come naturally to the staff at the Waterfront.

Every room has a stunning view of the lake, green rice fields and paragliders circling above.

The Waterfront Resort’s eco-friendly waste-treatment system, and use of solar technology reflect Karna Sakya’s commitment to environmental awareness. The hotel is perfectly situated for hiking trips up to Sarangkot, or longer treks in the Annapurna Conservation Area. Bird watching, angling, horse trekking and paragliding are also close at hand.

Clean, comfortable rooms, a delicious breakfast (included in the room price), a swimming pool beside the lake, and an outdoor coffee bar make for a pleasant stay. Despite its modern appearance, the hotel’s design reflects the architecture and raises the quality of tourism to international levels,” says Gautam.

Fusion living

The optimism of Pokhara’s tourism entrepreneurs is evident in the expansion of 400 hotels and addition of new ones. Temple Tree Resort and Spa is one of the newest in the business. Its distinctive western Himalayan architecture by Siddharth Gopalan with slate roofs, stucco walls and hand-made furniture is an example of clever fusion between Nepali tradition and modern comfort. The hotel attracts the conventional tourists, health and wellness enthusiasts as well as serve as a stopover for trekkers. Basanta Gautam of Temple Trees says they have invested in raising the awareness. The hotel is perfectly situated for hiking trips up to Sarangkot, or longer treks in the Annapurna range.

Fuel for thought

Guests like Pokhara’s Hotel Barahi for its view of the surrounding mountains, but what few of them know is that the hotel’s waste is used in its kitchen and bakery for cooking.

Hotel Barahi’s backyard has been transformed into a biogas plant that converts kitchen and toilet waste into flammable methane gas for energy. Although biogas is popular in rural Nepal, Hotel Barahi has shown that even posh establishments can use this technology.

“The municipality is not regular with collecting waste here, and we had a huge problem with disposal,” the hotel’s manager, Biplov Poudel, explained. The biogas plant cost only Rs 600,000 to build and includes a waste collection system, an underground digester and pipes to take the gas to the kitchen.

“All the biodegradable waste goes into the plant,” says Goranga Kaur, the hotel’s chef. The waste from the kitchen and the sewage pipes makes its way into an underground tank that can produce enough gas to power a stove for five to eight hours a day providing for hotel guests and 100 staff. Kaur says the hotel’s kitchen has been using the gas now for two and half years.

Khem Bahadur Roka who looks after the biogas plant says it is easy to maintain and operate. “We don’t have to worry about garbage disposal either,” he adds.

Says Poudel: “A biogas plant is the perfect solution to our waste management problem, and we save on our gas bills.”

Provided by nepalitimes.com

POKHARA PACKAGE

4 - 10 MAY 2012 #603

nepalitimes.com

Few Annapurna range.

Hyamja, with a panoramic view of the

Tour the hotel’s plant site.

With construction requiring only a few finishing touches, SkyZip expects to begin operations within May.

Strap up for a speedy trip down to

Pokhara, with a panoramic view of the

Annapurna range.

A video paragliding tour

Two feet not firmly on the

ground, #491

A video paragliding tour

Karna’s karma, #137

Tour the hotel’s plant site.

#703

POKHARA PACKAGE
Run to restore our heritage, heritage marathon. 5 May, starts 6:30 am from Durbar Marg, register by 5 May at Nepal Investment Bank branches.

MUSIC
SALT AND PEPPER, a retro-lounge with a variety of dishes to choose from, Hong Kong Chicken and Honey Chili Potatoes.

Bryanjan, enjoy great food at an affordable price, shrimp cocktails, Grilled Fish and desserts are favourites among guests.

Thik Thak Restaurant, this restaurant boasts live fish from the lake which means the fish dishes are always fresh and delicious.

ANOTHER STATE OF MIND, RLV RADIO presents DJ Rabbit and DJ Fliznik to keep the dance floor alive with their music. 4 May, 7pm to 12am

SIGN, Live music by SIGN band every week except Tuesdays and Wednesdays. 7-30 pm onwards. Corner Bar, Robinson Hotel, Lazimpat. Call 4411818

DINING
Public Cave, while their continental and Italian dishes like pizzas, sizzlers and spring rolls are a hit among customers, their main attraction is karaoke. Dkhopian, Pokhara. 9855039568

BOOMERANG RESTAURANT AND GERMAN BAKERY, offers a large selection of cuisine for those who want to enjoy a full meal, if not one can always buy equally appetising pastries from the bakery. Lakeside, Pokhara, 066-441142, 402978, 403474

MOONDANCE RESTAURANT, one of the few places in Pokhara that you just can’t miss, wash down its superb pizza and Lemon Chicken with a glass of mojito. Pokhara

PUBLIC CAFE, an exhibition of paintings by Andrea Lopez Iglesias. 11 to 24 May, 5pm (5pm on 11 May). Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited

EVENTS
MOUNTAINS AND FLOWERS OF THE SACRED KHUMBU VALLEY, water colour paintings by Bikhuni Jamsung Wargmo; depicting the same beauty of Khumbu. 27 April to 6 May. Park Gallery, Pulchowk, of Khumbu. 27 April to 6 May, 10.30 am to 6pm, Park Gallery, Pulchowk, 0623207

EXPRESSES, an art performance showcasing poetry, music, and fashion which will be followed by an art exhibition by Milan Rai. 5 May, 7pm, Trisara, Lazimpat

Concert at the British School, join the Chorale for some light music and songs including Singing in the Rain and highlights from the Jersey Boys. 5 May, between 3:30 pm and 6pm, free entry, donations go to charity.

The new faces of Tibet, an exhibition of paintings by Andrea Lopez Iglesias. 11 to 24 May, 5pm (5pm on 11 May). Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited

A feast of imagination
MOLLY JO GOREVAN
A woman dressed as a man in gold lame, wearing powdered wig, stands on top of a box and sings lines of Ovid. Outrageous, fantastic, campy, beautiful. Scenes from The Metamorphosis at Studio 7 at Hotel Vaja, brings Ovid’s poetry to life in unexpected ways. Zeaux wears the expression of a gangster in a gold-rimmed bathtrobe. Bacchus exploits onto the stage amid roaring guitars, in skin-tight purple silk pants, grapes dangling from his body. In a dream-like scene, several men are trees, leaves flickering between their fingers, holding up arcs of gauze hung with golden leaves, as the sound of crickets pulses through the theatre. The live keyboard music is spare and airy as the performance space. Veering between beauty and outlandishness, Scenes from The Metamorphosis manages to sustain an equilibrium between the tragic material of the stories and the playfulness of the production. Sometimes the play goes over the top. While gun-slinging youths didn’t seem outrageous, five pool boys dressed in skimpy sailor’s outfits, cheeks smeared with blush, bumping and grinding to rap eclipsed the ambience of a soft-core porno.

Opening 4 May 7:15 and performances every Friday, directed and staged by Sabine Lehman.

A MEAL OF MIND
Mr. Monish Adhikari from KUHS is the top student in Nepal for 4 Cambridge A Levels. This the highest accolade and Chemistry Topper in Nepal in 2011.

Congratulations !
To All Our Successful ‘A’ Level Students!

Students who have received scholarship from Fodun University

MONTANAVISTA RESTAURANT, Bistro Caroline, a great place to eat, relax, watch movies or enjoy appetising dishes like lasagna bolognese or a Nepali thali set. Lakeside, Pokhara

Chili Bar and Restaurant, from Nepali to European cuisine, this restaurant serves delectable dishes along with a dance floor and happy hour serving some amazing cocktails. Lakeside, Pokhara

Oxygen Lounge Bar and Restaurant, one of the most happening places in Pokhara with live band performances, good food and a wide range of drinks to choose from, Lakeside, Pokhara, 9844152888

ONCE UPON A TIME RESTAURANT, watch movies or enjoy appetising dishes like lasagna bolognese or a Nepali thali set. Lakeside, Pokhara

Pokhara Beach Club, a great place with superb views of the lake you can relax, enjoy amazing dishes while swimming or take a boat ride. Lakeside, Pokhara.

Black and White Café, a great place to spend a quiet afternoon surfing the net with some bakery items like the Swiss Apple Pie and chocolate croque with homemade icecream. Lakeside, Pokhara

Bistro Caribbean, a highly recommended place to eat and relax, their Chocolate mousse and whole fish dishes are a must for foodies. Lakeside, Pokhara
I's difficult to pick an eatery when you are in Pokhara's Lakeside, where every second building is advertising its kitchen's fare and happy hours. After browsing through some, we stepped into Byanjan Bar and Grill, a fairly new establishment on the lane. With Phewa Lake in its backyard, the two-storied Byanjan makes a smart move with an open patio and verandas. The wall-less design allows customers to enjoy their meal with a serene view of the lake. The interiors have been kept simple and fresh, with a comfortable sitting arrangement that goes well with the vacationing mood of most visitors.

Byanjan's menu is similar to most restaurants at Lakeside, with a selection of Thai, Italian and Indian dishes. Although named Byanjan Grill, the menu boasts of limited grilled choices. The waiters were friendly and hospitable, which, mind you, is still not always the case in Pokhara for Nepali faces. The orders took average time to arrive. We skipped the starters, but the restaurant offers regular Nepali favourites like Momo, Mutton Sekuwa, Chilly Chiken and Khaja Set, among others. The Grilled Pork in the starters looked tempting, but we decided to go with Spicy Shredded Pork (Rs 270) instead. The meat was tender and juicy, cooked just right to go with the spicy gravy. Its simple presentation did not quite do justice to the zesty dish. It also demands a side of rice, and we were lucky to have ordered some fried rice (Rs 160) to go with.

Byanjan Sizzler's (Rs 375) order entry list its portions and flavour. Grilled chicken, sausage and pork chops, accompanied by vegetables and fries-the sizzler is a hearty meal. The generous portions of succulent meat tasted as good as it looked with thick savoury sauce. A hint of black pepper added to the flavour of the dish. Absence of the usual noodle or rice side in sizzlers could almost be forgiven in this scrumptious meal. And our fried rice came handy again.

The menu doesn't list desserts, so make sure to ask for the separate dessert menu. The Cheesecake was average, but it was the Chocolate Mousse Cake (Rs 100 each) which gave our meal the perfect ending. The Apple Pie, we've been told, is also worth a try. A peek into our neighbour's table told us that the Petite Shrimp Cocktail (Rs 350) - baby prawn served with cocktail sauce, accompanied with toast - is quite a treat. Also try the Sear Fish Tawa Fry (Rs 220). The tangy cocktail achar compliments pan fried fish slices well.

Overall, Byanjan stands out among the countless establishments on Lakeside for its crisp interiors, quite ample and of course, the food. Also a good place to take a book and chill with a cold beer.

From Barahi Chowk, walk along Lakeside. Byanjan is on your left before you reach the next crossing.
Salt shakers

DHANVANTARI
Buddha Banjart, MD

Salt restriction lowers blood pressure. And lowering blood pressure should reduce rates of heart attacks and strokes. Unfortunately there are no clinical trials to convincingly show that just sodium (salt) restriction lowers the risk of myocardial infarctions, strokes and deaths. The latter three are the usual, well-known end points that are examined when figuring out the benefits in cardiovascular illnesses.

Normal kidneys which play an important part in regulating blood pressure can deal with the extra nitrogen in sodium chloride. However, when kidneys are damaged, as in kidney disease or heart failure, the kidneys’ ability to regulate blood pressure will show an effect, even though they are fed a salty diet. Such people will show an increase. And guess what, some will even have a lowered blood pressure. These are acute or short-term changes. Then there are also differences between how normal people react to excessive salt intake versus people with common diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure and kidney diseases. As often happens regarding general health recommendations these days, it is hard to find a “take home” message about salt restriction in all this confusion.

Turning to the internet and googling key words like salt intake, blood pressure, salted potato chips and so forth is one option. But the internet may lead to more mind-boggling, controversial recommendations. Following suggestions from Ayurvedic or Tibetan medicine is perhaps another option, but if you want conclusions from some kind of randomised clinical trials, you can bet Ayurvedic and Tibetan medicine will not deliver on these counts.

Another possible alternative is to look for dietary guidelines by well-established institutions like the World Health Organisation. Keeping in mind race and ethnicity, factors which influence blood pressure, it would be wonderful to have home-grown guidelines from South Asia, but we South Asians are too preoccupied with political problems to give priority to such guidelines. Western dietary guidelines recommend reducing salt intake to generally less than 2,300 mg per day in normal individuals and to less than 1,500 mg per day for people with high blood pressure, diabetes or chronic renal failure. But if figuring all this out is too complicated, a simple rule of thumb is not adding that extra table salt and cutting down on packaged instant noodles, crispy, salted potatoes, ‘achar’ and ‘titaura’.

More importantly, make sure to check your blood pressure, and if you are on blood pressure medications, don’t stop taking them based just on Ram Dev Baha’s pronouncements.
A debate is raging in the Nepali media between supporters and opponents of ethnicity-based federalism. But instead of being a vibrant discussion on how the country should be restructured, it has turned into an ugly confrontation between those for and against.

One side is not willing to accept anything less than federalism structured along ethnic lines. An otherwise insignificant Janamukti Party stole headlines last week by openly declaring that anti-federalists would be hanged. NEFNP members threatened an armed struggle. On the other side, rigidly orthodox status quoists are needlessly antagonising indigenous groups and solutions by making seethingly paranoid ethno-centric remarks.

This has polarised the debate to such an extent that no Bahun-Chettri can critique the 14-state ethnic federalism model without being blamed for trying to “protect their privileges”. Few Janajatis or Madhesis can speak about social harmony and national unity without being branded a “surrenderist” and a “traitor”. The us-vs-them narrative is now so firmly established that there is no place for moderate, sane and rational voices.

Nepal’s ethnic minorities have valid grievances which need to be redressed but fracturing the country is much worse than a caste confrontation. The feeble political leadership is not willing to accept the demand. There is a mirror image of this contestation in eastern Tarai as well. Four Mithila activists taking part in a peaceful protest in Janakpur were killed in a terrorist attack supposedly carried out by a rival Madhesi group on Monday. Muslims are on a warpath demanding a separate “non-territorial” province for their community, and frankly why shouldn’t they? Every minority group fears that without a state, their rights will not be protected.

The feeble political leadership is swayed by those within their parties who shout the loudest. What the future holds is much worse than a caste conflict between Bahun-Chetris and Janajatis, Tharus vs Madhesia. We are now heading towards a full-fledged multi-ethnic strife. How exactly do the leaders hope to resolve disputes between the overlapping territorial claims of Newa Prudhesh and Tamangal, Limbuwan and Khumbuwan, Tamuwan and Magarat, and balance the demands for one Madhes against one Tharuhat? These are complex issues and the parties are faced with a fait accompli on a three-week deadline.

Forming a new government before May 27 was part of a package deal on power. The future of the country is too important to be consigned to give-and-take between short-term politicians.

We have seen from Sri Lanka, Bosnia and ex-Czechoslovakia how political accommodation can lead to ethno-separatism and multi-pronged ethnic wars. It is easy to dismiss anyone who talks about a greater national identity as being an elitist, a follower of “Mahendra Path”, or a royalist. But ethnic politics is a dead ideology and has been long discarded. How many lives should be lost before we finally accept that there is an easier way to mainstream marginalised communities and ensure greater representation?

Such extremism is the work of a few loudmouth hotheads and goes against popular sentiment. The Himalmedia Poll last year showed that even among Madhesia and ethnic communities, there is little support for ethnicity-based federalism. This year’s poll, the results of which will be released next week confirm this. The loudest advocates of ethnic states in Nepal are intellectuals of the elite class who suffer from a guilt complex. They want to wash away their shame with the slogan of ethnic federalism but have forgotten to recognise that it is possible for all communities in Nepal to thrive, prosper, celebrate their uniqueness and enjoy equal rights and opportunities without setting up artificial borders. Experts and policy makers would have done the country a great service if they had worked to reinforce this message instead of fanning the flames of ethnic discord.

Last week after completing the Great Himalayan Trail trek across Nepal, Apa Sherpa and his team reaffirmed to journalists what many Nepalis already knew. That despite differences, there is a great deal of acceptance and goodwill among people of different communities. As Suwary Dhakal poignantly noted: “The mountain people are not warm until the plain people make quilts for them.” Any political arrangement that overlooks this heterogenous harmony and interdependence among Nepalis will lead us to tragedy.
Dangerous minds

A few ruthless leaders must not jeopardise democracy just to fulfill their personal ambitions and greed

There was a lot of hope after the war ended in 2006 that the country would finally have a new political landscape to ensure justice, peace and development. With just over a fortnight remaining for the CA deadline, there are good reasons for Nepalis to dread what 28 May holds for them.

This week’s deadly blast in Janakpur has sent a shiver of fear across the country, and the deteriorating situation in the Far West threatens to spill over into rest of Nepal. It may sound like an oxymoron, but only rational politics can defuse this time bomb. And we saw just such a stepping back from the brink in the announcement made late on Wednesday of the formation of a unity government.

Historically, individuals have always been more powerful than institutions in Nepal. Ambitious regents orchestrated massacres to get to the throne. Warlords killed rivals to get to power. Autocrats backed by the army unseated democratic governments at will. And in these past weeks, a few ambitious leaders have shown that they can endanger democracy and disrupt social harmony just to fulfill their personal ambitions and greed.

They exist in all four political forces in the country: leaders who put their personal ambition ahead of national interest. For them the negotiations over provisions in the new constitution are all about how their personal or party’s prospects in elections will be affected. At a time when we need statesmanship, we have seen politics at its narrow-minded worst.

Fortunately, we are seeing younger leaders within parties finally asserting themselves, and rising above parochial interests to persuade their leadership to make tough calls. The NC’s Gagan Thapa is among the most vocal and puts it bluntly: “This is no time to bake individual cakes. Our priority now must be to complete statute drafting, if possible by participating in this government or by helping from outside.”

There is seething anger within Nepal’s oldest party against its ambitious leaders who have a single-minded obsession to get to power. And now that the party has a chance to lead the government soon, we will probably see another re-enactment of the back-stabbing we saw last year.

The Maoists are ravaged by a similar power struggle, but they have managed to keep the Baidya faction limited to occasional fiery speeches, without seriously challenging the leadership. The UML is also torn by internal rifts, and is wafting as usual. How these factions are accommodated in the present government at a time when leaders should be writing the constitution is worrying to say the least. What is even more outrageous is the NC’s insistence that it should be allowed to lead a new government before 28 May.

The parties have wasted past weeks unnecessarily fighting over government change. Now, the NC and UML being in government may help bridge the trust deficit, but it will not guarantee anything else. The parties will still have to find a form of governance acceptable to all, and on thorny issues like electoral system and state restructuring they have to remain above narrow parochial interests to fit the demands of Janajatis, Madhesis and Dalits.

Most importantly, the parties must be responsible enough to appreciate the lurking dangers in Nepal’s political transition. Monday’s bombing was targeted at a larger crowd to create greater mayhem and upset the country’s delicately balanced ethnic mingling. The parties must defuse this explosive situation by finishing statute drafting in the next three weeks and ending the protracted transition so that we can close this chapter and move on.
The parties have failed to take the debate on federalism to the masses and don’t seem to be taking matters seriously. The Maoists are clamouring for ethnic states, but have not defined what that means precisely. Just naming states after different ethnic groups is not enough. Will the rights of minorities be protected in such states? Will historically marginalised communities be accorded special privileges in such provinces? Is ethnicity the sole basis of identity? What about other identities? These questions have been left unanswered. The issue of viability has also not been adequately discussed. Some people say federalism would be more viable if there are more states. But if the idea was to strengthen the centre against provinces, why did we need federalism in the first place? Having fewer states would actually help strengthen centre-state relation.

Under an ethnicity-based federal model, every group is entitled to states. You cannot give a state to Limbus and not give one to Khumbas. Trying to please all ethnic groups might work in the short-term and parties can bolster their vote banks. But long-term development of the country will be severely jeopardised. Federalism could have been a very good model for Nepal, but the way our leaders are handling the issue, it is bound to be a disaster. Until parties become more honest and accountable, it will not matter what model we adopt. Things are not going to change. After all, the same political culture that will be reflected in our future states.
A fast approaching deadline and the Supreme Court’s verdict have forced parties into making hastily agreement on major contentious issues through mutual give-and-take. The ongoing exercise is driven more by the need to meet the deadline with a workable document in hand, rather than with the aim of creating a long-term roadmap for new Nepal.

A constitution is not only a consensus based document, but a text that lays the foundation and gives direction to the country. While the leaders have finally realised that it is impossible for any party to draft a statute of its choice, they seem to have overlooked the actual purpose of the statute.

The leaders do not understand that this nation cannot sustain a jumbo parliament with 800 parliamentarians from the centre to state legislatures. Besides, the electoral model with 45 per cent proportional representation means that no single can win by a majority in the next elections. And our immature coalition culture is bound to further destabilise the nation’s unstable politics by institutionalising closed door give-and-take politics.

The gentleman’s agreement on the form of governance is unfortunate, because parties have agreed to divide executive powers between the president and prime minister in an effort to find a ‘win-win’ situation. Creating dual power centres will spark off turf war between the two executives. Similarly, by advocating for states based on ethnicity, parties have heightened the expectations of various groups who are now demanding their own provinces.

Analyst Muma Ram Khanal, like many others, predicts a difficult time ahead for the country: “When sentiments are provoked and left unaddressed or unmanaged, it gives rise to mass discontent and violence.” Nepal will have to face this reality sooner or later.
Our not-for-much-longer Prime Minister showed he has his priorities right by laying the foundation stone for a new 100-metre-high Republic Tower in Kirtipur. Cynic and naysayers have poked fun at this new erection, saying it looks like a cross between a minaret and an ICBM. But when the country suffers from a serious lack of self-esteem, we can do with a phallic symbol of territorial integrity and national virility. The tower has other uses such as:

- Serve as a giant lightning rod to protect the whole Valley from thunderbolts
- Fool American spy satellites into thinking Nepal has developed nuclear missiles and convince them to donate more food to us
- Put Nepal on the world map for the world’s ugliest leaning tower to bungee jump from
- Serve as a Folly even follier than Bhimsen’s Folly
- As the only manmade object in Nepal visible from outer space, serve as a beacon for alien crafts to use as docking station
- To mark where Kathmandu used to be if the Valley ever gets submerged again

Kudos to Keshav Stop-it for staging a comeback as the Development Commissioner of the Kathmandu Valley Development Authority (didn’t even know there was such a thing) to carry on where he left off as Mayor in 2000 when he demolished an entire neighbourhood to make the Maitighar Mandala Roundabout. Does his designation of Commissioner mean that he is legally allowed to pocket commissions? Just asking.

Stop-it Dai showed he is a man of action and intends to hit the ground running. He said his first order of business was to turn the UN Park into a Dating Spot for Kathmandu’s lovelorn and privacy-deprived couples. What a great idea. The romantic aroma wafting up from the Bagmati is sure to make smoochers swoon and faint. Keshav Cha even has a fall-back option: declare Kirtipur a Republic Tower-Cum-Dating-Spot.

On May Day while Comrade Maxarus was addressing a trucked-in crowd at Khula Munch to rail against “revisionists and counter-revolutionaries”, his nemesis Baidya Kaka was delivering a tirade barely 2 km away at Basantapare also against “revisionists and counter-revolutionaries”. Comrade Hitman and Comrade Prime Minister found themselves on the same Buddha Air flight, and there were two welcoming committees of local Baddies on the tarmac when they got to Biratnagar. Elsewhere, Comrade Top Budur chartered a chopper at govt expense to go down to Rautahat to inaugurate a footbridge, but found Comrade Mohammad Aftab had beat him to it and already cut the red ribbon, so Top Man decided that as long as he was in the vicinity, he’d hop over to Gaur and declare the place an Open Defecation Zone.

Hijacking aircraft is becoming a habit with Baddie ministers. The other day Lekhnath (“Red Head”) Bhatt decided to commandeer a Simrik Air helicopter that was on standby to take a bunch of American-Indian pilgrims to Muktinath. Comrade Butt thought he would make a quick airdash to his home village, but that took longer than expected. When the chopper returned to pick up the pilgrims, winds had picked up over the Kali Gandaki and the flight was scrubbed. The Indians did not find that funny at all and pelted the chopper and crew with projectiles until airport security arrived.

Good thing we are getting a new government. Quick question: do all those who pre-paid to get plum posts now have to pay new ministers all over again?