The results of this year’s Himalmedia Public Opinion Survey 2012 reinforce many of the conclusions of previous year’s polls: on whether or not the constitution will be written by deadline, what to do if it isn’t, who is to blame for the delay. The poll also reinforces an enduring message that has come out over and over again in surveys conducted over the past 12 years: Nepalis are too preoccupied with day-to-day survival and are disillusioned with politicians and fed up with politics. Their primary concerns are more mundane: jobs, inflation, corruption, health, education.

The fact that more than 7 out of 10 Nepalis think ethnicity based federalism is a bad idea is not a surprise because there was a similar result in last year’s poll. Nor was the relative popularity of political parties, with the NC being slightly ahead of the Maoists. What was new in this year’s survey was the surge of Baburam Bhattarai and the plunge in Pushpa Kamal Dahal’s popularity.

If the results of this public opinion survey are internalised by the political parties and their leaders, and translated into their election manifests it will prove that they are responding to the people. And this has to be done because the people are the voters.

Which three parties would you choose to deliver a peaceful, prosperous and democratic Nepal?

More things change, more they remain the same

Make-or-break media
This year’s Himalmedia Survey underlines the need for the media to be even more accountable and responsible

The terrain shifts
Analysing the Himalmedia Survey 2012 results
We have always known that in Nepal the more things change, the more they stay the same. History keeps repeating itself, usually as a farce. Now, we can quantify that. The results of this year’s Himalmedia Public Opinion Survey 2012 reinforces many of the conclusions of previous year’s polls: on whether or not the constitution will be written by deadline, what to do if it isn’t, who is to blame for the delay. The poll also reinforces an enduring message that has come out and over again in surveys conducted over the past 12 years: Nepalis are too preoccupied with day-to-day survival, are disillusioned with politicians and fed up with politics. Their primary concerns are more mundane: jobs, inflation, corruption, health, education.

Still, Nepalis instinctively know they have to work with what they have, and will back politicians who show integrity, efficiency and a can-do mentality. This is clear from this year’s popularity surge of Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai, with nearly a third of respondents saying they’d vote for him if he stood for elections. The reason is clear: more than half the respondents think he’s done a great job since he became prime minister. His populist photo-ops (riding a yak, travelling economy, cleaning the Bagmati) seem to have worked and people seem to want to crown the leader that he has surrounded himself with crooks. The poll also shows that the higher politicians fly the further they fall: Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal used to be elected prime minister and presidency. The issue of ethnicity-based federalism has polarised the political class, but at the people’s level there seems to be little doubt that the future federal units be on ethnicity is a bad idea. Reinforcing the results of the poll last year, upwards of 60 per cent of the indigenous people and Madhesis themselves are apprehensive about ethnic federalism. There is nothing wrong with righting historical wrongs, but it does seem that a few politicians want to propel themselves to power by using identity politics even though the silent majority among their own aren’t going along. In fact, nearly half the respondents no matter where they live and which ethnic group they belong to, say if you must have federalism, stick with the north-south model to make viable provinces. This is not the Bahun-Chhetri elite in Kathmandu talking, ordinary Nepalis seem to have inherently more common sense than the politicians who represent them.

The good news is that public opinion still matters in this country. It should matter because only then we can quantify public anger and prod political leaders to respond and reform their ways. Prime Minister Bhattarai’s popularity is proof that people still value integrity and performance, and will reward it even if it means clashing at straws. And the lesson from the rise and fall of Pushpa Kamal Dahal is to never take anything for granted: especially the people’s trust.

Ordinary Nepalis seem to have inherently more common sense than the politicians who represent them. The people still value integrity and performance, and will reward it even if it means clashing at straws. And the lesson from the rise and fall of Pushpa Kamal Dahal is to never take anything for granted: especially the people’s trust.

FEDERAL EXPRESS
Just give us peace, law and order, and justice (‘Federal express’, editorial, #603). Control corruption, cut down the government’s size and spending, and create employment. As long as the leaders do their job, the people will be happy, who is in power, Bhattarai, Dahal or Poudel.

Gopal

Why is there such disregard for human lives in this country? Did innocent people have to die in Janakpur? And what if more people are killed between now and 27 May, who will be held accountable? Do our leaders feel any shame or guilt? Why do all politicians just keep talking amongst themselves over petty and selfish issues?

Bikas

Deuba and Koirala are at each other’s throats. Kithan, Oil and Nepal are also fighting. And former comrades Dahal and Baidya are refusing to see eye-to-eye. But do any of these leaders actually care about the people? What about our demands and needs? We need to get rid of this male-dominated political structure and let women take charge.

Sheila Pradhan

Dahal and Bhattarai are learning hard lessons. It’s one thing to fight a war from the jungle and another to govern a country. Both of them have no experience of statesmanship and are quickly losing support of ordinary Nepal. The NC and UML now have the upper hand.

Mamata Sharma

No Maoist, NC or UML leader has made the slightest effort to look for alternatives, such as holding another elections or calling for a referendum and letting people resolve contentious issues like the Supreme Court had ordered them to do six months ago. Such merry-go-round politics allows politicians to preserve the status quo, accumulate more wealth and avoid facing the public. They don’t care about the 90 per cent of Nepalis who are suffering because of that inactivity and inaction.

Rabi

First we had 601 CA members and now three deputy prime ministers. Is this some kind of joke? We need to revolt against this madness and let the politicians know that enough is enough. We’ve already wasted 22 years, let’s not waste another day.

Nabin Dorgol

27 May will come and go and life will move on as usual in Nepal. No matter what kind of constitution is made, the public will quickly accept it, like they accepted the declaration of a republic. And we will continue living with power and gas shortages, crime and corruption, while hordes of young Nepalis escape to foreign countries in search of jobs and better living conditions. This is the way the country is still the best way forward.

Bhunika Ghimire

Rubena is spot on with her argument. Disregarding principles and long-term problems in exchange for short-term gains can be harmful. Democracy is about accepting dissident views, but blanket inclusion of every voice will derail the process in the long run. After all, there has to be something called procedure and complex issues require serious debates and thought. Accommodating everything for the sake of appeasement is dangerous.

Mohan Baidya

SUDHA

BEWARE
Thank you Rubena Mahato for highlighting the experiences of 5th Nepal, Boks on and former Czechoslovakia (’Beware of the future’, #603). All three countries could have prevented ethnic conflict and violence if leaders had shown statesmanship and long-term vision, traits which are sorely lacking in Nepal leaders as well. We should learn from the mistakes of other nations, but do our politicians ever?

Kiran L

We now find ourselves in a catch 22 situation. If the country is not carved out along ethnic lines, there is imminent danger of violent or short-lived civil unrest. And if the country is divided along ethnic lines, there is greater danger of prolonged civil strife.

Poudel

The overall message of the column is good. We have to be united and stand up against divisive politics. But I disagree with the writer’s assertion that political accommodation can lead to ethnic separatism. There are two types of the country is still the best way forward.

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The overall message of the column is good. We have to be united and stand up against divisive politics. But I disagree with the writer’s assertion that political accommodation can lead to ethnic separatism. There are two types of
This year’s survey shows a surge in popularity of Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai, with nearly a third of respondents saying they’d vote for him if he stood for elections. This is popularity based on perceptions of performance and honesty. More than half the respondents think the Bhattarai government has done a better job than previous governments.

The results prove the power and role of the media in shaping public opinion. The photo-ops of Bhattarai riding a Mustang after his swearing-in, flying economy class to New York, inspecting eateries in Mugling, widening Kathmandu streets, and getting his hands dirty cleaning the Bagmati built the impression of a man who is a do-er and not a talker.

A lot of this was a result of careful media management and spin, but it seems to have worked. The public has also been watching him, and feel he has done everything he said he would: conclude the peace process, form a unity government, try to get the constitution passed. Being incumbent, there is a certain Teflon effect, where the fact that corruption is rife in the Bhattarai cabinet or that he has been propped up by India (an accusation his own party seniors openly make) doesn’t seem to stick on the prime minister. Or, it could be argued, he would have been even more popular if he had cleaned up his government.

In stark contrast, the Himalmedia survey also shows that public opinion can be fickle, and trust of the people once lost is hard to win back. In all past polls, Pushpa Kamal Dahal has been scoring high on popularity, but he has been knocked off his pedestal pretty ignominiously this year. The 2012 Himalmedia survey shows his rating has plummeted to single digits, trailing way behind Baburam Bhattarai, and even behind ceremonial president Ram Baran Yadav. Again, the media’s coverage of his contradictory statements, his luxurious lifestyle and rumours that he is the richest man in Nepal have turned public opinion against him despite (and perhaps because of) his high profile in the press.

One question in the public opinion poll concerned how much the people trust various institutions like the Nepal Police, Nepal Army, the CIAA and the Election Commission. The media tops the list with nearly a third of the respondents saying they trust the media the most. Given the impact the media has on public opinion of political personalities and parties, and given the faith the public puts on the media’s credibility, places an even bigger responsibility on the shoulders of Nepal’s media.

Unlike politicians whom they cover (and uncover), no one elects journalists, editors and op-ed writers. This means media personalities have to stand up to an even higher moral code and standards of integrity. This year’s Himalmedia poll underlines the need for the media to be even more accountable and responsible so as not to squander the overwhelming trust the public has placed on it.

Kunda Dixit

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### Where do you trust the most?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Most</th>
<th>Enough</th>
<th>Don't trust</th>
<th>Don't trust at all</th>
<th>Don't want to say</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CIAA</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election Commis.</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>60.3%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courts</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>58.7%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army</td>
<td>37.7%</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>57.2%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil service</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>50.2%</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
<td>55.3%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>49.5%</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### How has your trust in the following institutions changed in the past 3-4 years?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Increased</th>
<th>Same</th>
<th>Decreased</th>
<th>Don't want to say</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government offices</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
<td>52.2%</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
<td>49.5%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VDCs, Municipality</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>46.5%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer rights groups</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>44.5%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>49.7%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectuals</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The terrain shifts
This year’s Himalmedia Public Opinion Survey proves Nepalis are still more preoccupied with stagnant economy than deadlocked politics

Year after year, Himalmedia polls have shown that despite hardships or during the darkest days of war, a majority of Nepalis were always hopeful about the future. Nearly all respondents in every poll have said they are worried about the lack of development and jobs, about endemic corruption and inflation, but they have kept an optimistic outlook. The public never held their rulers in very high esteem, but realise that they are what they are.

This year’s poll is no different. The Himalmedia Public Opinion Survey 2012 shows that inflation remains the number one preoccupation of the people with 92% saying it is worse than last year, and 64% saying corruption is worse. Politics is way down in their list of concerns, and the constitution is important only in as much as it has a bearing on peace. But a majority of respondents still feel things are improving, and 85% of those in the Himal and Pahad cite road access as the biggest progress.

Disaggregating the data, however, shows a stark difference in the perception of development in the Tarai where half the respondents said there has been little development. Interestingly, those who can’t read or write seem happier, and the more educated the respondents the more dissatisfied they seem to be with the pace of development.

Nepalis seem disillusioned with a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy and want direct franchise to elect future executive presidents or prime ministers. Asked which form of government they would prefer, nearly 40% favoured a directly-elected presidential system, and 25% wanted to vote directly for prime ministers.

The most dramatic change this year compared to the last few polls has been in the perception of top political personalities. Most respondents give credit to Baburam Bhattarai and Pushpa Kamal Dahal (37% and 20% respectively) for concluding the peace process.

When asked who they would directly vote for as executive prime minister or president, Bhattarai topped the list of names of 12 senior leaders from four parties with a 30.6% approval rating. Pushpa Kamal Dahal trailed with 8.6%, and President Ram Baran Yadav ranked second with 10.4% of votes. The Baidya faction was nowhere in the picture, and all other leaders of the NC, UML and Madhesis were in the single digits, or even below 1%. Surprisingly, even though his name was not on the list, many said they would vote for Gagan Thapa. But the popularity contest is still up for grabs because one-third of the respondents said they didn’t know or didn’t want to say.

A new question in this year’s poll dealt with the performance of the Baburam Bhattarai government which came to power in November last year. Nearly 60% of respondents gave Bhattarai a thumbs up, while 26% felt there was no difference between this government and previous ones.

In a surprising departure...
Now that the peace process is nearly finished and the Supreme Court has decided that the constitution must be written by 27 May, do you think the parties will be successful in finishing the constitution by that date?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
<th>Don't want to say</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directly-elected presidential system</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present system of prime minister by parliament</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directly-elected prime minister</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliament to elect both president and prime minister</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Would you prefer a presidential or parliamentary system of government?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
<th>Don't want to say</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directly-elected presidential system</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>9.2</td>
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<td>16.7</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compared to previous governments how do you rate the performance of the Baburam Bhattarai government?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Bad</th>
<th>The same</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
<th>Don't want to say</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More or less even.

The poll was taken a month before the deadline for the constitution, and as last year, half the respondents are convinced that no new constitution will be ready by 27 May, and a third of them said it was because none of the big parties actually want a new constitution. The people seem more optimistic this year compared to a year ago when 75% thought a new constitution would not be written by the deadline. If a constitution is not written, most respondents still think a new election is the best way forward. Like in the 2011 survey, most of those interviewed (42%) felt the Maoist were mainly responsible for delays in the constitution. On the most contentious issues in the new constitution, there is a clear majority against demarcating future federal units along ethnic lines. A full 73% of the respondents rejected ethnicity-based federal units and only 14% were undecided. Last year, 76% had said no to ethnic federalism. Interestingly, like last year, 64% of hill ethnic respondents, 70% of Newars and 57% of Madhesi ethnics (which include the Tharus) didn’t want federal units for ethnic groups.

Asked what would be an alternative model for federal units, 45% favoured north–south territorial units that include Himal, Pahad and Tarai and the proportion of people who support this are equal in all three regions. Thirty per cent wanted the current zones to be simply converted into federal units.

Himalmedia Polls

Himalmedia has been conducting public opinion polls nearly every year since 2000 to gauge the public pulse. Over the years, in monarchy or republic, war or peace, the surveys have served as important barometers of Nepali people’s regard (or disregard) for their rulers, the relative popularity of political parties, and recorded the main concerns of the people.

Past polls have accurately predicted the results of elections, and served as rough referenda on the rise and fall of political personalities. Which must be why they have often been criticised as being biased or unscientific by leaders who do not fare well. But when they do better in the surveys than their rivals, the same parties have held up survey results to prove their popularity.

Former king Gyanendra once scoffed at public opinion polls, saying they served no purpose in a country like Nepal, only to lose his throne soon after. Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who has always done well in opinion surveys (except this year) famously boasted after the 2009 survey: “Even a media house that has always been critical of our party has said I am the leader the people trust the most.”

This year’s Himalmedia Public Opinion Survey was based on interviews with 3,210 respondents in 38 districts selected through a non-random sampling method in April. More than 60 enumerators fanned out across the country to select respondents between the ages of 18-60, and asked 39 questions during the week of 22-29 April.

Compared to the 2011 survey, enumerators felt respondents were even less hesitant to answer interview questions, volunteering their names and phone numbers. In one case, when an enumerator had misplaced her pen and was ticking off boxes with a pencil, a respondent insisted that she use a pen. The full disaggregated tabulation of the poll is available online www.nepalitimes.com
For Kathmandu’s 100,000 motorcycle riders, it is all about dodging pot holes, being stuck in traffic jams, waiting in queue for petrol, and (lately) trying to outsmart policemen with breathalyzers. For a real adrenaline rush, gun your bike and head off beyond Nausise. Go on, do it, and see what Nepal has to offer. That’s what I did last month, and what an adventure it’s been.

As I navigated across the country, passed through 60 towns from the far west to the east and crossed over into Sikkim on my 500cc Enfield Bullet, I realised the first rule of road tripping in Nepal: make a plan, but be flexible. Bandas, chukka jams, landslides, are common and strike without warning.

Rule number two: don’t be fazed by flat tyres in the middle of the jungle or Maoists threatening to burn your bike during a banda. Look around, ask for help. Nepalis outside Kathmandu are very helpful.

Once you escape the traffic bottleneck between Thankot and Nausise, the raw beauty of the countryside will take over and you won’t feel any pain. There are some really bad roads (Surkhet-Dailekh) but the highways in the west are surprisingly well maintained compared to rest of the country. In Bardiya, you’ll have to ride through the national wildlife reserve at 40 kmph, not faster, not slower, or risk being penalised at the army anti-poaching checkpoint.

For the more adventurous, take the Karnali Highway to Jamla, but it may be a better idea to let them at least gravel the road first.

For the best and shortest route to the east from Kathmandu, drive down to Hetauda from Dakshinkali. The roads are being re-surfaced but the rough ride is worth the risk, passing lush green hills reflected on the Kulekhani reservoir.

It’s one long day from Hetauda to Kakarbita on Nepal’s eastern border with India. But you can also make a pit stop in Janakpur then head out to Lahan the next morning. You can keep going east and hit India, or head north to Dharan, Dhamkota and up to Khandbari.

The reassuring throb of the Bullet takes you through this incredibly diverse country, and you notice how much things are changing because of road access. But also how much of the Nepali soul remains the same.

Contrary to popular belief, crossing over to India on a motorbike is not that difficult. The Indian Embassy in Kathmandu issues vehicle permits to Nepalis within two working days after they submit a bank guarantee of Rs 10,000 which is refundable upon return, vehicle registration and insurance papers. With the permit in hand, the Indian border security forces won’t interrogate much and vehicle owners will be asked to undergo regular customs check.

A three hour drive from Nepal’s eastern border takes you to the beautiful tea estate town of Mirik. A further three hours and Darjeeling with its toy train and sweeping panorama of Kangchenjunga beckons. Kalimpong and its flower nurseries should not be missed either. From there it is on to Gangtok in Sikkim, and one notices how much more economic progress this place has made. Everyone speaks Nepali, it feels like Nepal, only more prosperous.
The East-West Highway is 1,000 km long and Nepal's road artery.Roads in the western Tarai are the smoothest in the country, like this one in Dang. The road from Surkhet to Dailekh is not for the faint-hearted.Demonstrators torched this car near Surkhet to enforce an impromptu banda. The risks are always higher in the mountains for the motorcyclists, however scenic, you shouldn’t take your eyes off the road. With most men having migrated, women repair tyres in Dailekh.

A united Nepali nation

As leaders in Kathmandu scramble to finish a new constitution behind closed doors, they should listen to the people I met from Mechi to Mahakali. It is a country of breathtaking beauty and heartrending poverty. Especially in the west, you can see that poverty spares no one. The Brahmins and Chettris are as poor as the Janajatis and Dalits, their fates are intertwined, as are their hopes and their stories of survival have remained unchanged for centuries. All castes struggle under the poverty line, and it is poverty that binds them together. In the western Tarai town of Kusum, a destitute young Brahmin widow with two children who lost her husband during the war runs a tiny roadside restaurant. A Madhesi milkman bicycles four hours in the scorching heat everyday to generate income by selling milk to her. A young Dalit fisherman sells his fish at her eatery. A Chettri woman works as a maid to feed her children.

At tea shops and lodges along the way I ask people about federalism. They are fed up with politicians, they think federalism is just a slogan, and having suffered violence during the war they don’t want the country to be divided along ethnic lines. In Janakpur, I meet Madhesi families tired of extortion by armed Madhesi groups. This should have never happened, they said. In Rajbiraj, Madhesi and Pahadi families said they have lived together for generations and don’t want to be separated. A tiny tea stall by the highway in Butwal is run by three men: a Brahmin, a Madhesi and a Gurung. One makes tea, one waits on customers and one washes cups. Here you go. This is the model of a united Nepali nation practiced by ordinary people without any need to carve the country up.
EVENTS

EXHIBITION ON EVEREST, a photography exhibition by Jeff Bolz which shows Mount Everest in its true glory. 20 April to 29 May, 9:30 am to 5pm, Image Ark Studio, Katheshwore, Patan

-legged to raise funds for a grant sponsored by the Nepal Trust. 4 May to 29 May, 7:15 pm, Hotel Vayu, 4271545, vayra@mos.com.np

World Fair Trade Day Fair, exhibition of handicraft and agro food products by 40 FTG Nepal members. Visit food stalls of typical Newari cuisine. 19 May, 10am to 6pm, Nepal Art Council, 5pm, Image Ark Studio, Katheshwore, Patan

Art on Display, sixteen artists display paintings they under the guidance of Lapinive Bangdel. 7 May to 17 May, 10am to 6pm, Nepal Art Council, Katheshwore

HOME SICK BLUES, enjoy graphic art, oil paintings, photography and collages from artists Christian Lemmerz, Michael Kvium, Peter Bonde and Haugen Sorensen along with Danish chef Claus Christensen’s art collection. 13 May, 6pm to 8pm, Bar, Radisson Hotel, Lazimpat. Call 4215068

DINING

Delices de France, savour in Royal Coutous as you listen to Egyptian singer Emad Gabra. 11 May, 7-20 pm, Thamel

Modern Metamorphoses, a modern take on one of the most renowned Latin poems, Ovid’s Metamorphoses. Rs. 800 (including tea) every Friday, Saturday and Sunday from 4 May to 29 May, 7:15 pm, Hotel Vayu, 4271545, vayra@mos.com.np

Shanti Deep Prayojan, light lamps to raise funds for a grant sponsored by the Nepal Trust. 4 May to 29 May, 7:15 pm, Hotel Vayu, 4271545, vayra@mos.com.np

ALCHEMY, an authentic Italian restaurant which serves dishes like Pizza Quatro Stagioni and Spaghetti alla Puttanesca. Thamel

Dragon Café, enjoy momos, sizzlers and vegetable coins at the most reasonable prices. Kumaripatan

La Rotiserie, get your fill of roasted delights like chicken, duck and trout. Jawalakhet

Just Baked, a cozy café with amazing pastries and friendly ambience. Old Baneshwore

Pesto Vostro, a pretty place with some great pasta. Their bacon wrapped sausages are a must. Thamel

Manny’s Eatery and Bar, enjoy mouth-watering Continental delicacies with fine hospitality. Jawalakhet

Lazy Gringo, fail-safe Mexican restaurant. The lamonade with refills is what won us over, but the food is mighty fine. Jawalakhet

1905 Restaurant, feast on roasted delights within this converted aristocratic residence. Waltled ambience and green surroundings make it an oasis within the city. Kantipath

Salt and Pepper, a resto-lounge with a wide variety of dishes to choose from like Hakka Noodles, Hong Kong Chicken and Honey Chili Potatoes. Lakeside

Buyanjan, enjoy great food at an affordable price. Shrimp cocktails. Grilled Fish and desserts are favourites among guests. Lakeside, Pokhara

TEA / COFFE

PERI PERI, home of legendary Portuguese flame grilled chicken, enjoy dishes served with the trademark Peri Peri sauce. Jhamalikot, 9835637907

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

STATION BBQ, try the table top grills for self-cooked barbecue or order mutton skewers and pork chops. Jhamalikot

BU KEBA, the organic restaurant in town offers continental and Indian cuisine along with chef’s originals. Sanepa

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There are restaurants you love for what they offer in terms of their food and then there are restaurants you love for their ambience, fine service and ‘hangoutbility’, despite their lack of excellent food. Lorry’s firmly falls into the second category.

Lorry’s has the potential to become a favourite among Kathmandu’s fine-food loving patrons. If it works on improving the quality of food and maintaining consistency, the saving grace of the meal. The tomato sauce was sublime. With just the right amount of creaminess and a smooth consistency, it was definitely a good idea, the sauce was sublime. With just the right amount of creaminess and a smooth consistency, it was definitely the saving grace of the meal. The tomato sauce on the paste too was a surprise. None of that pre-packaged canned stuff at Lorry’s, fresh with a lingering taste of fresh herbs and a hint of dry oregano.

Lorry’s is still very young and has aspects of a good restaurant- uncluttered, simple décor, unobtrusive staff, good music, clean restrooms, extensive bar. If it works on improving the quality of food and maintaining consistency, Lorry’s has the potential to become a favourite among Kathmandu’s fine-food loving patrons.
Travel medicine in Nepal

TRAVEL VACCINES
Buddha Banerji, MD

Travel medicine is usually taught as prevention and treatment of diseases in Westerners who come as tourists to the developing world and fall ill. In reality though, tourists to the developing world in Westerners who come as visiting friends and relatives settled in developed countries wishing to visit you, it’s essential to recommend them to visit local travel clinics in their home towns for advice or look up websites of organisations like the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) or WHO for vaccinations and other precautions they should take before flying to Nepal.

So if you have Nepali friends or relatives settled in developed countries wishing to visit you, it’s essential to recommend them to visit local travel clinics in their home towns for advice or look up websites of organisations like the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) or WHO for vaccinations and other precautions they should take before flying to Nepal.

Another important point is that busy clinicians in Nepal hardly ever obtain travel history from their patients. With Nepalis being more mobile (labour migrants, for example) than ever before, keeping a travel history is important. So if you travel to Africa and come down with flu-like illness, you probably have the dangerous kind of malaria unless proven otherwise. You might have to tell your doctor of your recent visit to Africa regardless of whether the doctor asks you or not.

The weather system from the NH monsoon is falling as condensation driving moisture up to the mountain. It isn’t monsoon yet, but just the circulations in the Bay of Bengal driving moisture up to the mountains which is falling as condensation when it hits the mountains. The rain is still going to come in localised storms over the weekend, but the precipitation will be higher. The southerly wind has also raised the maximum and minimum temperatures in Kathmandu, which has been unseasonably cool in the past month.

Salvage Value: A Kabadi-wala flattening scrap sheets of zinc roofing from the demolished squatter residences at Thapathali on Tuesday afternoon.

Crossing Paths: A local porter walks past a tourist on Tuesday on a trekking route that leads to Pangboche in the Khumbu region.

Victory Waves: Newly crowned Miss Nepal Earth Nagma Shrestha, Miss Nepal Shristi Shrestha and Miss Nepal International Subeksha Khadka (L-R) at The Hidden Treasure Miss Nepal in Kathmandu on Sunday.

Travel to Africa and come down with flu-like illness, you probably have the dangerous kind of malaria unless proven otherwise. You might have to tell your doctor of your recent visit to Africa regardless of whether the doctor asks you or not.

THIS WEEK MARKED THE TURNING PHASE OF THE WEATHER SYSTEM FROM WESTERN-DRIVEN TO MONSOON-DRIVEN. IT ISN’T MONSOON YET, BUT JUST THE CIRCULATIONS IN THE BAY OF BENGAL DRIVING MOISTURE UP TO THE MOUNTAINS WHICH IS FALLING AS CONDENSATION WHEN IT HITS THE MOUNTAINS. THE RAIN IS STILL GOING TO COME IN LOCALISED STORMS OVER THE WEEKEND, BUT THE PRECIPITATION WILL BE HIGHER. THE SOUTHERLY WIND HAS ALSO RAISED THE MAXIMUM AND MINIMUM TEMPERATURES IN KATHMANDU, WHICH HAS BEEN UNSEASONABLY COOL IN THE PAST MONTH.

Salvage Value: A Kabadi-wala flattening scrap sheets of zinc roofing from the demolished squatter residences at Thapathali on Tuesday afternoon.

Crossing Paths: A local porter walks past a tourist on Tuesday on a trekking route that leads to Pangboche in the Khumbu region.

Victory Waves: Newly crowned Miss Nepal Earth Nagma Shrestha, Miss Nepal Shristi Shrestha and Miss Nepal International Subeksha Khadka (L-R) at The Hidden Treasure Miss Nepal in Kathmandu on Sunday.
Our netas often say what they don’t mean, but every so often when they actually mean what they say people don’t trust them. No one believes a compulsive liar, even when he is telling the truth.

For the last three weeks, top party leaders have been in marathon meetings and when ambushed outside, their general refrain is: “We have once more agreed to agree.” Confronted by a whole spectrum of identity pressure groups, the parties are trying to strike midnight deals behind closed doors. They seem oblivious to the fact that the nation has moved beyond formal, dry and institutionally structured political debate and the electorate is getting polarized.

It is an irony that parties which were once so obsessed with majoritarian politics are now desperately trying to forge a ‘consensus’ because they are too scared to find out if they have the required number on their side. In this time of great churning, the only safe bargain for the leaders is to follow the people’s aspiration for social harmony, justice and development.

The Himalmedia Public Opinion Survey 2012 shows clearer and more assertive response in favour of a directly-elected executive, and no, people are not scared of a totalitarian dictator taking over. Compared to previous years’ polls, the respondents are even bolder in expressing their views, as seen in the very low ‘Don’t Know/Can’t Say’ count. On federalism, the majority of respondents reject ethnicity-based enclaves, but feel there should be some form of affirmative action to uplift the marginalized within inclusive federal states.

Interestingly, there is a departure on this position in the Madhes where people have given a clear indication they do not want to be governed by the hill establishment. Respondents in the Tarai show greater wisdom than the leaders they elected by favouring regional and cultural autonomy, not an ethnically or politically divided entity. This is an important distinction which the Madhes-bashing mainstream media and Kathmandu establishment often overlook.

Disaggregating this year’s poll results also shows people in rural areas, especially the youth, are more positive and feel a degree of change due to improved road access, education, health and drinking water facilities, but there is seething anger among the more educated and professional class who can’t find jobs, and whose lives are frequently paralysed by shutdowns, fuel shortages and a tripling of the price of basic commodities in the last ten years.

Angry questions hurled at politicians in public forums and cynical comments in the Kathmandu media (including on the pages of this paper) are results of desperation among the urban educated. But even in these desperate times the people have shown remarkable optimism that the nation will overcome protracted transition post-27 May.

The times they are changing...
KUNDA DIXIT

Captain Alexander Maximov used to fly MiG fighters in Russia before coming to Nepal to work for Avia Club in Pokhara.

On Saturday morning he had taken a tourist up the Seti Valley in his blue single-engined Ukrainian-made Aeroprakt to see the Annapurnas up close. It wasn’t a perfect day and there were lingering clouds from the previous night’s thunderstorm. He got back to Pokhara, and took off immediately again with another passenger before the winds picked up over the mountains.

He had reached his cruising altitude of 3,300 m above the Seti, 25 km north of the airport with Machapuchre and Annapurna 4 towering over him. Looking down, he noticed something odd. The Seti wasn’t its usual thin white thread at the bottom of the valley, but looked like a brown rope. The leading edge of the wave was a dark wall of water he estimated to be about 10 m high.

Because of his military training, Maximov knew exactly what he was seeing and thought he better alert people downstream. He immediately radioed Pokhara tower and told the air traffic controller that “a big water” was coming down the Seti. The control tower informed security agencies and FM stations in the city, and it was possibly because of this half-hour forewarning that a lot of lives were saved.

“I could see multiple avalanches of ice and rock blocking the Seti just below the point where the Bhujung Khola joins it,” Maximov told Nepal Times over phone from Pokhara on Saturday evening, “I turned the plane around to head back to the airport, but the water was travelling faster than the plane.”

Still, by putting the plane on a shallow dive Maximov managed to catch up and took dramatic aerial pictures of the Seti flood arriving on the northern edge of Pokhara before disappearing underneath the city. The flood was preceded by a red mass of floating logs as the water raced down river. Maximov has been flying in Pokhara now for more than a decade, but says he has never seen anything like what he saw on 5 May. He was also saddened by the loss of life, especially when he heard that three Ukrainian visitors had been swept away by the flood at Tatopani and are still missing.

In his own understated and modest way, Maximov brushed aside praise for the quick thinking that may have saved so many lives. “I was just doing my job and what anyone else in my place would have done,” he said.

**Eye in the sky**

Russian pilot of sight-seeing flight radioed Pokhara about the Seti flood and possibly saved many lives

KUNDA DIXIT
JOHN PLAYERS
Premium men's wear from SURYA NEPAL
UML’s tantrums

Interview with CPN-UML Chairman Jhala Nath Khanal
Kantipur, 7 May

Will the CPN-UML join the national unity government under Baburam Bhattarai?
We were ready to join the present government under Bhattarai, but we were put off by the way portfolios were distributed without consulting us. We are holding talks with other parties and if the discussions end positively we will consider joining. But they need to give us the respect we deserve.

What sort of respect is the party seeking?
If they want us to be a part of the government, they should consult us before assigning portfolios. But they kept us out of the entire process.

A directly-elected president is entitled to key powers

A directly-elected president is entitled to key powers and will not be just ceremonial. However, we have seen forces that want to limit the power of the president.

The intra-party rift has turned very public in recent times. Why have issues not been resolved yet?
It may look like that from the outside, but we have the situation under control. We have been friends for over 30 years, yes, after long discussions among the parties in the Dispute Resolution Sub-Committee, we came to the conclusion that a mixed system of governance is the way to go. We have set up a team which will analyse the experiences of other countries and offer recommendations. This agreement still stands true.

Would you say that geo-political factors are influencing the constitution writing and peace process?
Of course. To begin with, the 12-point deal was forged in Delhi. Present political processes clearly show geo-political influence. If we talk about the constitution, we have been deliberating on the political systems of China and India and interacting with their leaders. There is direct as well as indirect effect. But it is not just China and India, even South Africa, Europe and the US are interested in Nepal’s constitution. While some influences are positive, others are negative. Nepalis, intellectuals and leaders now need to reject unnecessary meddling and work for the country’s best interests.

“I am a teacher, so there is no way out.”

We are now trying to figure out how to manage the distribution of power. A weak president is likely to dampen the party’s political stature in the long run.

Lessons unlearned

Last month the Ministry of Education signed an agreement with agitating teachers’ unions in the presence of major political parties and speaker Subhas Nembang. The agreement aimed to end frequent strikes which had paralysed Nepal’s education sector for several months and the government finally seems serious about addressing the concerns of the teachers. If the agreements are implemented sincerely, it will benefit public school teachers who have been in service for more than five years but have not received permanent status. Teachers will be entitled to pension plans like other government employees and can go through fair and standardised promotion processes.

But educationist Tirtha Khania feels the agreement is just an excuse for the party to popularise its cause. “It cannot implement the agreement, it must be carried out honestly. If they cannot implement the agreement, the UML is willing to stay out of the government and help in the process as we have been doing so far.”

“Are you just making excuses because the unity government failed?”
Are you just making excuses because the central committee refused to endorse the agreement that you had signed with the parties?
It is not an excuse. The central committee expressed dissatisfaction over the Prime Minister’s high handedness and took a decision accordingly.

“A directly-elected president is entitled to key powers”

The CPN-UML has backtracked on its earlier commitment to join the national unity government citing dissatisfaction over portfolio distribution. After signing the five-point agreement, chairman Jhala Nath Khanal had said with a lot of hope that a unity government would pave way for statute drafting. But the UML’s refusal to join the government because it was not offered ‘attractive’ ministries is shameful, especially since the party has been in power the longest after CA elections.

The UML should realise that in a parliamentary system, portfolio distribution is the prerogative of the prime minister. Besides, during Madhav Nepal also handed out important portfolios like home, defense, finance and communication to members of his own party during his tenure in office. By not joining the unity government, the UML has exposed its greed and this move is likely to dampen the party’s political stature in the long run.

Interview with Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal in Nepal, 13 May

Can you guarantee that the constitution will be completed by 27 May?
I can’t give you 100 per cent guarantee, but our party firmly believes the constitution will be written by the deadline.

We may have to make certain amendments, but the parties already have an understanding and have successfully forged an agreement. If we fail this time, we won’t be able to face the public, so there is no way out.

Certain groups are demanding ethnicity based federal units. What are your thoughts?
I don’t see it only as ethnicity based federalism. This is about identity, not ethnicity. For example the calls for Karnali and Seti-Mahakali provinces are not based on ethnicity, but on identity. People from these regions have been marginalised and lived under a central government for too long. They now want equal rights and recognition. If we do not address their demands, we will be ignoring the people’s problems.

You said there is close agreement on a mixed system of governance with a directly-elected president.
Yes, after long discussions among the parties in the Dispute Resolution Sub-Committee, we came to the conclusion that a mixed system of governance is the way to go. We have set up a team which will analyse the experiences of other countries and offer recommendations. This agreement still stands true. We are now trying to figure out how to manage the distribution of power. A weak president is against the ideals of democracy.

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The intra-party rift has turned very public in recent times. Why have issues not been resolved yet?
It may look like that from the outside, but we have the situation under control. We have been friends for over 30 years, but recently competition within the party has increased and this is not favourable. We have decided that our Baidya faction friends should be allowed to voice their opinions in public, and protest. We will also express our opinions, but the party will not break. Expressing one’s belief while keeping the party united is very important, that is our strategy for now. Let’s see where it leads us.

Here’s your constitution

“Lessons unlearned”

Sikahak, April-May 2012

Last month the Ministry of Education signed an agreement with agitating teachers’ unions in the presence of major political parties and speaker Subhas Nembang. The agreement aimed to end frequent strikes which had paralysed Nepal’s education sector for several months and the government finally seems serious about addressing the concerns of the teachers. If the agreements are implemented sincerely, it will benefit public school teachers who have been in service for more than five years but have not received permanent status. Teachers will be entitled to pension plans like other government employees and can go through fair and standardised promotion processes.

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Although the Baidya faction appears to be a staunch opponent of the Bhattarai government and Dahal-led party establishment, there are very few differences between them. Both groups want to ultimately seize power and agree that a people’s revolt is the way forward. The party establishment believes that a revolt may not be the most appropriate approach at the moment, because their earlier attempts to impeach ex-army chief, Rukmangad Katwal, and implement a general strike failed. However, the hardliners within the Baidya faction blame lack of preparation and carelessness for the letdown. They argue that such minor hiccups should not deter them from the path of revolution. Furthermore, the Baidya faction does not want the statute drafting to be completed by 27 May, because that would provide ripe conditions for a revolt. The establishment, on the other hand, realises that it can’t stay in power without the blessings of the southern neighbour and plans to declare a constitution by the deadline. However, insiders say Dahal wants the remaining two weeks to unfold in such a way so that a constitution is not possible so that he can make someone else a scapegoat. Dahal knows Baidya has greater support of the former combatants and the only way to secure his political future is to keep the party united. Baidya is likely to accept Dahal’s leadership if he endorses the hard-line agenda. The fate of the Maoist party now rests on whether the new constitution gets written on time.

Five foreign companies have submitted their applications to Nepal Investment Board for developing five mega projects in the country. Investment worth of Rs 350 billion is expected to be poured into aviation, tourism, transport and other sectors. According to Radheek Pant, head of the board, US, Chinese, French, German and British companies are interested in financing these projects and talks with the companies will begin once the cabinet passes a regulation that will empower the board to make decisions. Although Pant refused to divulge much information about potential investors, he says all five companies are financially and technically competent to carry out the projects. In 2011, the Bhattarai government declared 2012-2013 as investment year and set an ambitious target of attracting Rs 80 billion in foreign investment. But business as usual has put off countless investors. For example the Sapta Koshi High Dam and Sunkoshi-Kamala multipurpose projects are still in limbo and the Indian government who was funding these initiatives is losing patience.

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Now that the infamous 4-point agreement (a shotgun marriage between the Maoists and Madhesis) has been replaced with the 5-point agreement (a shotgun foursome between the Mao, NC, UML and Madhesis) the donkey turned to a noted Nepal-watcher to explain the significance of this and why we need two governments in three weeks.

Since I recorded his answer, here it is verbatim:

“You see, it’s like this. Oli and Poudyal wanted to oust Bhattarai through a no-confidence vote in the CA to force him to induct the NC and UML into a unity government. At first Bhattarai ignored them, but when he found out that with the Baidya faction threatening to mutiny and the smaller parties joining, it looked like the no-confidence may actually work. So Sitaula and Amres got together with some guidance from Lainchour to convince Bhattarai and Dahal to agree to bring the NC and UML into government by getting Susil and JN to agree. Sitaula dangled a post-May 27 PM-ship carrot in front of them. Ram Saran (PCCMFNFOUPG/FQBM and Nepal were told not to make trouble otherwise their chances of becoming PM in the future would go out the window. It worked with them, but it didn’t work with Oli and Deuba who stubbornly refused to join the govt. You’re with me so far?

The trouble started because the Madhesi parties got to keep powerful ministerships as lollipops so they won’t create another bawal in the constitution negotiations on carving up the Madhes. This angered Oli who saw that his party was getting nothing out of this arrangement. Deuba went into a deep sulk because his boys are not getting Energy and Culture, and Ram Chandra who has been eating crow ever since he lost the vote in the House 17 times thinks the rug has been pulled from under him yet again. But this gobblement is just for show anyway, since by 27 May there is supposed to be another govt that will be led by the NC. Jhusilo is licking his chops and has already sent his daura suruwal to the dry cleaners, but he first has to be nominated to the CA, and the conundrum for the kangris is who to throw out to make place for the Maha Muntri. And being a bit out of it lately, he hasn’t figured out that Sitaula thinks he is made for greater things and may not be satisfied with Home Minister.”

Whoa. I never knew it was as simple as that.

The latest estimate of the net personal worth of the Baddie nomenklatura is that it has exceeded $2 billion, of which half belongs to Comrade Gargantuan himself. He should be worried that FATF is stuck again and its anti-money laundering and anti-terrorism provisions may mean his trans-continental assets may be frozen. But the latest public opinion survey also shows there has been some frightening erosion of the Awesome brand. Then there is Comrade Prabhakaran who by now owns 80% of the bulldozer fleet in Nepal of which there were 1,000 at latest count. They’re hired out at Rs 20,000 a day: do the maths. The comrade is also now the sole sales agent here of a Chinese parastatal that is trying to pan off two MA60s and five Y12s to KNACK at over inflated costs. Finance Minister Barsah Man Pun has now been controlling the purse strings of the treasury for six months and has been so adept, his nickname in the ministry is “Artha Man”. Then of course there is Mahara Dai whose lives by the dictum “political power flows out of my wallet”.

Why beat around the bush? Let’s just make Comrade Amareso prime minister and appoint Prof SD Muni Nepal’s ambassador to New Delhi?

And here is the headline of the week: The Akhanda Far-west Struggle Committee which was driving to Kathmandu for holding talks with the government has been stuck in banda by Akhanda Chitwan.

Gobblement of Nepal