Fifteen years ago, trekking around Gokyo meant being completely cut-off from family and friends. But today, the sight of porters using cell phones in Lobuje or even Everest Base Camp is not uncommon.

When the biggest private mobile company, Ncell, set up a 3G base station powered by solar (pic, left) for broadband mobile communication at 5,200 metres at Gorakshep near Everest Base Camp in 2010, it revolutionised Internet accessibility in the region. Since then, eight other base stations have been installed.

In the last two years, mobile penetration rate across 75 districts of Nepal has increased from 32 to 55 per cent. With mobile phones, Internet penetration rate in Nepal has also increased from six per cent two years ago to 18 per cent now. Mobile telephony has been able to leapfrog the digital divide and bypass the restrictions of landlines, and is placing Internet on the fingertips of every mobile phone owner.
I have been ten years since the country’s VDCs, IDDCs and municipalities have remained without elected representatives. That is ten years too long. The Maiistas get a lot of blame for diminishing local democracy in this country by systematically targeting elected village and district councillors and bombing most VDC and IDDC buildings during the Maoist uprising, equally, if not more, destructive was the NC government in 2002 led by Sher Bahadur Deuba postponing local elections just because it didn’t want the opposition UML to continue its dominance in local bodies. This created a vacuum in the villages which the Maoists easily filled with their terror-based approach to garnering local support.

Today, the constitution-writing process is derailed, we have no national parliament, the country is being ruled by a government that has outlined its mandate, it is led by a lame duck prime minister and a ceremonial president. If anyone were out to sabotage governance in this country, they couldn’t have done a better job. There is a deadline for constitutional amendment on 22 July which is most certainly not going to be met. Changes of elections for a new Constituent Assembly by November are slim which may not put the country back on its feet. A new CA is just going to be another expensive dead-end, and too fraught for the fragile polity to handle. Even more outlandish is the proposal floated by those arrayed in this country, they couldn’t have done a better job.

All the big parties are reluctant to go for local elections because they are afraid of facing the people whom they have misled for so long.

CAUTION: CHILDREN AT WORK
Political transition can no longer be an excuse for the criminal neglect of children in Nepal (Caution: children at work, editorial, #611). Unfortunately, it is also the lack of political will and focus that has led to the majority of all other forms of exploitation of Nepal’s marginalised. Laws alone will not save children as long as there is no government worth its name.

Child labour is the symptom of a problem, not the cause. The cause is a structural deficiency that leads to poor governance in which it is in turn affects every aspect of development in the country. Fix the structure and child labour as well as all other problems like unsafe drinking water, trafficc, energy and water shortages, the appalling pollution in the Bagmati will fall into place.

CREATED OF THEIR CHILDHOOD
It’s one thing for children to help earn money for family expenses and another for their lives performing dangerous and grueling work (Cheated of their childhood, Bhaktivajra #607). Children’s education is sacrificed as a result. When will people realise that the key to breaking the cycle of poverty is education? With better education, children can get better-paid jobs in the future. If the cost of education can be subsidised, it might be easier to get children out of the workforce and back to school.

I come from Singapore where child labour is illegal and strict punishments are meted out to offenders. Therefore it is devastating to read about the severity of child labour in Nepal. Childhood is the best time to learn and explore about the world. But thousands of Nepalese children are stuggling and missing out on the most crucial part of their lives. Unless leaders are willing to take a firm stand to solve widespread poverty, which will eventually put an end to child labour, nothing is going to change.

All the big parties are reluctant to go for local elections because they are afraid of facing the people whom they have misled for so long.

COUNTRY MOVING AGAIN
If there was one thing that worked in Nepal since 1990, it was grassroots democracy. It empowered elected village leaders to focus on the health, education and welfare of their constituents and allowed them to be re-elected based on performance. The councils could have been more inclusive, but as education levels improved, that would have happened. At the village or district level, it doesn’t really matter which party a candidate belongs to, as the best and most honest managers get the job so they can improve people’s lives. In the absence of elected municipal councils, Nepal’s cities are bursting at the seams with unplanned growth, crumbling infrastructure, mountains of garbage, and rivers that have turned into sewers. But all the big parties are reluctant to go for local elections because they are afraid of facing the people whom they have misled for so long.

National politics is a mess and hopelessly stuck. While we wait for party leaders to get their act together, the least they can do is fulfil the people’s aspiration for representative local government.
It’s not that our politicians don’t know how much people hate them, they must sense it. But they just choose to do nothing about it because they know it doesn’t really make much of a difference.

In a real democracy, elections could fix that. Only those who show integrity and promise would be elected, the crooks would be ousted, and that would be that. But our ruling class knows there are other ways to get themselves elected: cheating, intimidation or ethnic politics.

Voters are disillusioned and have lost confidence in elections because just about everyone is tainted, and it’s just a matter of choosing between equally rotten alternatives. Our leaders may not be sure about a lot of things but they are convinced of their indispensability. And the one thing that brings them together is a collective fear of facing voters.

The death of the CA was tragic, but some party bosses are now proposing to revive it just because they have cold feet about 22 November. Nepalis have had enough of that circus already. This is the same CA that failed to do its job despite repeated extensions. What has changed, that it will deliver this time?

Besides, by whose authority do the leaders hope to reinstate the CA? We don’t have a parliament, the president is ceremonial and the PM is a caretaker. There is a constitutional void but that isn’t an excuse to run this country like a banana republic.

Prime Minister Bhattarai didn’t have good intentions when he set out to dissolve the CA and unilaterally announce the elections, but that should not mean parties committed to democratic practice should also refuse to contest polls and call it a “Maoist trap”. The NC and UML will risk losing whatever little credibility they have if they keep opposing elections and avoid going to the people.

By now the NC and UML have had enough time to figure out what useful idiots they have been to the Maoist plan. They stopped being agenda setters long ago, they have been reactive and have taken the back seat in politics. Most of their leaders are either corrupt, incompetent or uninspirational. Forget vision, they can’t even organise a rent-a-crowd rally in Kathmandu. If these are the guys supposed to defend democracy, then democracy in Nepal doesn’t need enemies.

A massive ideological and structural overhaul of both parties is long overdue. An election would focus their minds, force them to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and forge a strong democratic alliance to face elections.

If elections don’t turn up good candidates, we don’t boycott them. We try and build a system that will push good candidates to the process. The NC and UML complain that the Maoists are trying to drag the country towards a one-party dictatorship. Perhaps it’s time they go to the next election with young, dynamic and forward-thinking leaders who will reclaim the progressive agenda from the radicals. And perhaps it’s also time youth leaders stop whining and take initiative instead of begging the old men to hand them power.

What the people don’t want to see are the same old Sushil Koiralas, Sher Bahadur Deubas, Ram Chandra Pandels, Jhal Nath Khansals, Medhav Kumar Nepals, or KP Olis. The two parties are dominated by failed and ageing alpha males from the past, it’s time to make a clean break.

A CA election may not solve our problems, but the demand for a constitution through a CA is so powerful and longstanding that any attempt to declare a constitution through other means will just radicalise positions. A better solution would be to hold national and local elections and then have the parliament pick up where we left off on the constitution from the earlier CA.

Local bodies have been without people’s representatives for ten years now. There is no presence of the state in many parts of the country, local governance is in shambles. In the absence of the parliament, the caretaker government has grown inordinately powerful. The prime minister thinks he can not just bring a full budget through ordinance but run the entire country from Baluwatar. Unfortunately, the opposition is only making him stronger by obstructing elections and not coming up with their own alternatives.

The only way forward is to resolve the acute democratic deficit in the country through local and national elections. And the first step towards that is to form a national government.
Wire(less) below Everest

As a student, Adam Steiner went on the Gokyo trek 15 years ago, and remembers being completely incommunicado from his family and friends for the three weeks he was up in the mountains.

This spring, he returned to Everest Base Camp and was surprised to find 3G mobile phones and cyber cafes all the way from Namche to Gorakshep.

“It’s incredible, pretty soon there is going to be no point on earth without phones and the Net,” he said.

While the mountains look the same, (except perhaps for the receding glaciers) Namche has turned into a bustling modern town. But what is completely new is the sight of porters talking on their mobiles or listening to music blaring from their cell phone speakers while they haul 40 kg of mountaineering gear on their backs.

In the last two years the mobile penetration rate across the 75 districts of Nepal has increased from 32 to 55 per cent. Mobile telephony has been able to leap frog the digital divide and bypass the restrictions of landlines. With mobile phones, the Internet penetration rate in Nepal has also increased from 6 per cent two years ago to 18 per cent now.

The biggest private mobile company, Ncell, set up a 3G base station for broadband mobile communication at 5,200 metres at Gorakshep near Everest Base Camp in 2010. Eight other base stations have been installed in the Everest region which has changed the way locals interact with each other.

“We have had video conferencing up to the second camp on Everest through Ncell 3G,” says Laxman Adhikari, a climate researcher at the Pyramid International Observatory in Lobuje.

While telecom firms have recently begun expanding their base stations in the higher areas like Khumbu, many companies have been providing satellite solutions to expedition groups and hotels in the area for almost a decade now.

The most popular are satellite phones that are sold in Nepal by Thuraya and bypass domestic networks and go directly to satellite. Thuraya’s handsets are now so small they look indistinguishable from cell phones.

STM Gramintel provides VSAT (very small aperture terminal) connections to a growing clientele in Solu Khumbu and other far flung districts such as Taplejung, Mustang and Jajarkot since 2004 with Internet bandwidth up to 512 kbps in the Khumbu region. Binaya Dhungel of Gramintel says his company is helping the Ministry of Health and Population set up telemedicine centres at 26 district hospitals.

VSAT receives/transmits signals from terminals installed at dispersed sites connecting to a central hub via Satellite using small diameter antenna dishes. The technology is now increasingly popular among hotel and lodges in the region as
Mahabir Pun’s Nepal Wireless Project put Nepal on the map of the Internet’s global village, but he is not resting on his laurels. After connecting 15 remote districts with telemedicine and computer education, the project is now working with Worldlink Communications to develop and extend Internet network in rural areas.

Pun, who is a recipient of the Ramon Magsaysay Award, believes that unless technology is used to empower local people by uplifting their socio-economic conditions, its transformative power will go to waste.

“The Internet is more than a tool, it is a necessity and offers rural areas the chance to catch up with the city,” Pun told Nepali Times.

Worldlink will provide Internet access to rural schools and health centres at minimal cost to help develop social infrastructure, and transform access to communication in rural Nepal.

www.nepalwireless.net

Trekker look for connectivity even at the wilderness of the Himalaya.
The higher you go up the mountain, the higher the price of the internet at the trekking lodges. Alpine Inn in Lobuje provides Wi-Fi Internet to its guests at Rs 1000 per hour. But given that their monthly cost for Internet during tourist season is Rs 20,000, the inn barely breaks even. So why do they do it?

“We make our money from the food and drinks they buy here, and they come because of the Internet,” explains Mingma Tsering Sherpa of Alpine Inn. But with smart phones and mobile Internet, cyber cafes are starting to lose business.

Tseten Sherpa of Sherpa Internet Café at Dingboche says that the business has gone down over the years due to the use of Internet through mobile phones.

“Mobile phones now work even as high as Gorak shep and the base camp so we are virtually out of business,” says Tseten.

There is a mismatch between the VSAT rentals and cheaper mobile Internet, so people like Tseten and Mingma see the Internet as an unviable business. “The solar panels don’t always work and we have to use generators which guzzle petrol that we buy at Rs 650 per litre,” says Tseten.

Despite this, the Internet boom is impacting not just tourism but health and education in the Khumbu. Khumjing High School, one of many schools established by Edmund Hillary, has computer classes and will be expanding the existing wireless Internet connection later this year.

“Although computer education isn’t compulsory here, interested students in sixth grade and above attend computer classes after school,” says principal Mahendra Kathet. He hopes that with Internet accessibility, which has been made easier and affordable through Nepal Telecom’s ADSL landline connection, students in Khumjing won’t be left behind their city peers.

Khunde Hospital has also benefited from the Internet because doctors there regularly use telemedicine to consult specialists in Kathmandu and abroad. Eliza Bajracharya, physician at Khunde Hospital told Nepali Times: “The Internet has transformed the way we do work. It also allows us to keep in touch with our families and this makes us feel less like we are in a remote area.”

Empowering technology

Ncell launched 3G services at Kala Pathar (5,675 m) in 2010

A satellite dish at a hotel in Lobuje

A porter talks on a mobile phone on his way to Namche

Internet rates pinned on the notice board of a hotel in Lobuje.

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Picking up the pieces after war

A novel shelter is helping children orphaned and injured during the conflict to rebuild their lives

Nepal’s war may be over, but it has left behind orphans. The conflict also wrecked the economy, and families are unable to take care of children. The injured have nowhere to go to get treatment. The state is preoccupied with heftier issues.

Into this fray have stepped in many charities to help the most vulnerable sections of society. And one of them is in Sankhu on the Valley’s eastern edge, far from the chaos of the city, a shelter for war orphans, abandoned, sick and injured children. Hamro Gaan Eco Village educates the children, nurses them back to health, provides psycho-social counseling and re-integrates them back into society.

“The children come from extremely difficult and unfortunate backgrounds. Many of them are orphans whose parents were killed during the insurgency by the state and the rebels, but no one is going around saying ‘your side killed my father,’” says René Veldt, a Dutch national.

Veldt started the shelter in 2006 with support from the Dutch aid group, Stichting Veldwerk, to help Nepali children in a small way. He admits the scale of the problem is much larger, and his work is just a drop in the ocean.

Birha is from Kalikot and was found in Bir Hospital taking

Community helps its poorer households to ensure sanitation and save children’s lives in rural Nepal

Nepal is home to thousands of children in rural Nepal. Only 43 per cent of households in the country have latrines.

A simple gesture on the part of a village elder to help build a toilet for his
save lives

poor and blind neighbour has now grown into a massive campaign in Dang that has helped build more than 2,300 household latrines in VDCs here. The ‘Aligning for Action to Make Diarrhoea History’ campaign was launched in the aftermath of an outbreak of diarrhoea in this mid-western district in 2008 that claimed 88 lives. Health officials and the development community wanted to avert another epidemic that struck a chord with the community, to buy building material and built their toilet within a week. This simple strategy helped build more than 2,300 household latrines. Each of the three building is equipped with fire-extinguishers and at least two water hoses. When René Veldt (pic, right) built Hamro Gaun, fire and earthquake safety was on top of his list. Each of the three building is equipped with fire-extinguishers and at least two water hoses. Buckets of sand and water can be found on every floor. Veldt has also put in place an earthquake warning system that emits an alarm at least 30 seconds prior to the actual quake. The children at the orphanage are taught earthquake safety tips and undergo regular preparedness drills.

Safety first

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FUTSAL CARNIVAL, enjoy a fun-filled fair as you cheer for your favourite futsal team, dance to the music of DJ Phuchhey and savour delicious snacks from the food stalls. 28 July, 11am to 7pm, Grassroots Recreational Centre, Mandikatar Highway, a charity show of the highly acclaimed movie by Gari Khana Deu. 8 July, 6.30 pm, Kumari Hall, Kamal Pokhari, 9808886949, 4464616
CHOPSTIX, savory Asian food cooked in true Chinese fashion sure to charm and impress. Begin your feast with the Dragon Chicken; it is one-of-a-kind. Kumaripati, 5551118
NePest III, don’t miss this open band competition where the winners get a chance to perform with Polish band Decapitated. 90, 25 August, Binklumandrap, Fun Park, Kathmandu
Albatross Unplugged, catch the live performance of Albatross for a musical Friday evening. 90, 6 July, 5.45 pm onwards, Backyard Foodjoint and Pub, Jhamshedpur
Live Music Night, Shabnam and Cannalz band playing every Wednesday. Absolute Bar, Hotel Narayani Complex
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ORGANIC CAFÉ AND SALAD BAR, hearty breakfasts and healthy salads while you catch up with your reading or emails in the heart of Thamel. Chakshibari Road, Thamel, 4215726
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ORGANIC CAFÉ AND SALAD BAR, hearty breakfasts and healthy salads while you catch up with your reading or emails in the heart of Thamel. Chakshibari Road, Thamel, 4215726
Bhojan Griha, traditional Nepali restaurant that serves up great local food with folk music and dance. Dillibajar
Ah Wilderness!, family comedy written by Nobel Prize winner Eugene O’Neill and directed by Deborah Menosi. Rs 200 (for adults) and Rs 100 (for students). 14 to 15 July, 3pm, Vajra Hotel, Swayambhu
Demystifying Portraiture, a workshop by Spanish photographer Arantxa Cedillo for photography enthusiasts who want to meet people and tell their stories through portraits. 21 to 22 July and 28 to 29 July, 8am to 3pm, Jhamshedpur
RATNA PARK EXHIBITION, photographers Rohan Thapa and Lucas Perin come together to present Ratnapark and its significance to Kathmandu and Kathmanduites alike. 2 to 6 July, 10am to 6pm, Nepal Art Council, Babar Mahal, 4220735
Ah Wilderness!, family comedy written by Nobel Prize winner Eugene O’Neill and directed by Deborah Menosi. Rs 200 (for adults) and Rs 100 (for students). 14 to 15 July, 3pm, Vajra Hotel, Swayambhu
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GG Machan

With restaurants growing like mushrooms (for actually faster than mushrooms) in the Jhamel lane, it is becoming harder to pick one for a dinner night. After much contemplation we stepped into one of the new establishments, GG Machan.

True to its name, the restaurant has created a calm ambience, good for a quiet contemplation we stepped into one of the new establishments, GG Machan.

For starters, the Twakka Makai (Rs 190), a signature creation of Chef Sandeep Khatri I had once tried at Bu Kebab, caught my attention. The crunchy corn, sautéed with spices, is a fantastic adaptation of the roadside chaatpate. Every spoon will make you want more. Trust me on this one.

The description of the Melting Pokoda (Rs 200) was too tempting to ignore. Mashed potato and mozzarella, seasoned in batter and then deep fried, looked like a treat when it arrived. But the pokoda was a little too big to finish in a single bite, and couldn’t quite achieve the “melt in your mouth” effect. Tip to the chef: decrease the size and increase the quantity. The potato could also use some spices.

Don’t forget to meet Mr Wong at GG Machan. I don’t know if it is inspired from the cartoon character Mr Wong or the Chinese restaurant by the same name, regardless of its source, Mr Wong’s Pork Fillet (Rs 270) is worth a try. As you bite into the Cantonese style pork braised with spices, you can taste the tenderness of the meat and the rich sauce. Mr Wong’s Pork Fillet is a must have.

While we were wonderfully surprised by Mr Wong, the GG Machan Fried Chicken (Rs 480) didn’t quite live up to our expectations. Considering that it was a specialty of the restaurant, the beer battered chicken seemed a bit too bland for my taste, even with the tomato sauce that accompanied it. The Petrucci Alfredo (Rs 390), pasta cooked in wine flambéd garlic with mushroom and chicken, proved to be a mouthful of creamy and cheesy flavour and an aftertaste of jimmu, a herb usually used to flavour dal. For a cheese lover like me, the Alfredo was heavenly.

From the Indian kitchen, we picked the Mushroom Rogan Josh (Rs 320). The spiced fried mushrooms were delightfully juicy. The spicy gravy would have been a perfect match for naan or roti but it went well with the Chicken Fried Rice (Rs 200) we ordered.

We ended the evening with Chocolate Brownie (Rs 180) with ice cream (Rs 40). The brownie was a little too strong on cinnamon, but the duet of the brownie and the ice cream gave our evening a sweet ending.

I wouldn’t recommend the non-alcoholic drinks at GG Machan, the choices are limited and not impressive. Stick with the regular coke or beer in their king-size beer glasses.

SOMEPLACE ELSE

Cosmopolitan Café, located in the heart of Basantapur, this cozy café offers arguably the best chicken sizzler in town. Frequent by famed guitarist Hari Maharjan, spot him there and you might get an impromptu performance with your meal. Basantapur (along Kathmandu Darbar Square), 4225248

Krishnamar, a specialty Nepali restaurant at The Dwarka’s Hotel, 6 to 22 courses, an authentic Nepali meal. The Dwarka’s Hotel, Battisputali, 4479488

CIBO, a sandwich bar at heart, this café serves up one of the best sandwiches in town. Laxmidur and Pulchok

Casa Toscana, varieties of yummy pizzas to try and other Italian delights. Casa Toscana, Pulchok

Cinnamon Grill Lounge, offers delicious food and good music, added bonus- live performance by Ciney Gurung every Saturday. Jhamsikhel

Cinnamon Grill Lounge, offers a wide range of Korean delicacies at affordable prices. Thamel (opposite Roadhouse Café)

YIN YANG RESTAURANT, east meets west as you choose from a variety of Thai and continental dishes. Add a little spice to your life with the pad thai or green curry. If you can’t handle the heat, fall into the safety net of its western dishes. Thamel, 5am to 10pm, 4701510

Hankook Sarang, from Bimbiob to Sangeyopal, Hankook offers a wide range of Korean delicacies at affordable prices. Thamel (opposite Roadhouse Café)

CHA CAFE, this Japanese restaurant is popular for 4 spaghetti and burger steaks. Thamel

Cafe Kaldi, this famous restaurant serves a great variety of coffee and offers free internet access. Thamel

Lake View Resort, with a cultural show every evening and hospitable staff. Lake View promises a pleasant stay. Lakeside, Pokhara

Pokhara Grande, a swimming pool to escape from the tropic heat, a massage parlour and spa to loosen up and a gymnasium to release stress. Pokhara Grande is a great option to unwind this summer. Lakeside, Pokhara

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It is a rare film that is made about people of retirement age. Cinema tends towards glamorising youth, and romance always seems to happen to the attractive and young. Well, The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (for the Elderly and Beautiful) is a film about seven English retirees who travel to India when they fortuitously find an advertisement online extolling the grace, beauty and exotic pleasures of the Marigold Hotel, a promising sounding hotel in Jaipur, the famed Pink City, with its palaces and romantic promises.

Each of the main characters has a tragic back story, some are unable to afford hip surgery in the UK and have been recommended to travel to India for a more budget surgery, others are retired civil servants barely able to afford a shabby apartment with a panic button in case they fall, one has lost a husband and her apartment in the course of paying off his debts, another is in search of a long lost Indian love. This is a film about the indignities of growing old and the injustice that comes with it. Most of our characters have debts, another is in search of a long lost Indian love. The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel is sure to bump up the box office with an ensemble cast with an average age of 70. Kudos to him for pointing out to the world does not just revolve around beautiful people in the prime of their lives.

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The most important part of the treatment is to assure the patient that although this problem is annoying and inconvenient, it is not life-threatening. Sometimes patients with IBS have concomitant difficulties digesting milk and other dairy products, which is called lactase deficiency. Lactase is the enzyme in the small intestine necessary for digesting dairy products. Amazingly about 90 per cent of people in South Asia are lactase-deficient which leads to the classic gurgling noise (“paet gudag gudang”) from the belly followed by bloating and discomfort after drinking a glass or two of milk. Because this is such a common problem here, lactase deficiency may overlap with IBS. Patients with IBS should try staying away from milk and dairy products and see if that helps them. There is also evidence that IBS is linked to mental problems like depression and anxiety and seeking help in this regard may also be helpful in the treatment of IBS.

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Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) which this patient has is one of the most common problem a doctor (especially a gastroenterologist, a bowel doctor) comes across in his clinic in Nepal. This is known as clinical diagnosis where the patient never has fever, chills and weight loss. However, sometimes patients with IBS do see a competent Nepali gastroenterologist who made the correct diagnosis without resorting to unnecessary, expensive laboratory or radiological testing. He is now working in Dubai.

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We may soon have a new prime minister and a new cabinet, but the problems will be the same old ones that have haunted this nation for the last four years. Nepal’s traditional politicians haven’t learnt from history, and are therefore doomed to repeat it.

The megalomaniacs in the ruling circles are dragging this country back to the pre-27 May deadlock. Tuesday’s all-party meeting made it clear that this bunch of men is impervious to reality and simply incapable of learning anything at all.

Baburam Bhattarai and his coalition partners in government may pat each other’s backs but they don’t seem to have anything new to offer either. They have been busy with populist agendas while under their watch, corruption and mismanagement in the government have broken all previous records. Inflation and shortage of essential goods has hit people hard.

Political bickering at the top has a chain reaction on the economy, development and people’s livelihoods. The expansion of roads throughout the country, construction of hospitals, bridges and schools in remote areas should have brought relief to many. Instead, life has gone from bad to worse because our politics is such a mess. Public resentment against the parties is building, and it is going to manifest itself in elections which is why everyone is terrified of elections.

The opposition NC and UML share a part of this blame, but people will ultimately question the incumbent government for failing to get a grip on the situation. It is those in power that people expect action from.

To be sure, the government has found itself in an unprecedented void. The two main parties in the coalition have suffered serious splits. Its legitimacy is being questioned at every step. But by calling for the ouster of Bhattarai without presenting an alternative, the opposition is trying to drag the nation into another crisis. Both sides are gearing up for a showdown this monsoon.

The NC and UML are putting pressure on the president to act, while the Maoists have invited Janajati leaders to form a new front and join their coalition. This may be the beginning of the end. “Legitimately the present government cannot be ousted until the next elections but it will be forced to resign if the coalition falls apart,” a Madhesi intellectual told me this week.

Amidst all this, an important development is taking place within the Madhesi front. Last week, honorary Madhesi, Sarat Singh Bhandari broke away from the Bijay Gachhadar-led MJF-Loktantrik. Then, this week MJF-Republic withdrew its support from the government after ousting its sitting minister Rajkishor Yadav.

On the surface, this looks like an intra-party squabbling, but one can discern a trend. The fact that Baburam Bhattarai chose not to replace an expelled member of the party in coalition from his cabinet has exposed the cracks in the monarchy, they weren’t this bad.

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One of the main deal-breakers in the constitution on 27 May was a lack of agreement on how to constitute a future federal system. Various parties proposed states based on ethnicity, language or geography, but ultimately the politicians failed to agree on how to administer the country, or what to name the new states.

“An understanding of how to recognise identity, and how to balance diversity, is still unresolved. And what identity means, individual, group, or national?” asked Sapana Pradhan-Malla, a lawyer and recent member of the CA.

The mid-July deadline for approving a national budget will soon be reached, dozens of bills are yet to be ratified, including ones to end caste discrimination and determine reparations for people who disappeared during the war, while 3,100 former rebels in cantonments await word on their reintegration into the national army.

A key demand of the November 2011 peace deal was to integrate former rebels into the national army. Most of the 17,000 Maoist fighters eligible for government-funded ‘retirement’ packages of up to Rs 800,000 each took the money, while some 3,100 decided to try and join the national army.

Control of the rebel camps, where the fighters have lived since the 2006 peace deal, switched from Maoist to state control in mid-April, but integration into the national army cannot proceed without government approval, said Bala Nanda Sharma, a retired army general and coordinator of the multi-party Army Integration Special Committee.

On 10 May, the committee sent the prime minister a request via the Defense Ministry to clarify how to determine a fighter’s age and level of formal education, two deciding factors for joining the army. Should the results of the UN verification process in 2008 be used, or the current levels? Sharma said the committee has so far not received a reply, delaying progress.

“We have been discussing the ways with security agencies to integrate the combatants who have opted for integration,” Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai’s political adviser, Devendra Poudel, said. “The issue is also being discussed in the [ruling] party meeting, but we have not yet decided how we should go about it.”

Robert Piper, the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Nepal, told IRIN that integrating the fighters, a key step in honouring the November peace deal, was a “big concern” because having the fighters in cantonments is not “tenable”.

There were 38 bills the legislative committee was reviewing before it disbanded, including three considered critical:

- The Bill on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2007), which proposes establishing a commission to investigate past cases, prosecute perpetrators, and provide reparations to the victims.
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...
What is a constitution? 
Kul Bahadur Shahi, 53, asked: “What is a constitution?”

His main concern is how bandas affect his ability to move on. A community of farmers in Banbhair village, 20 kilometres outside of Nepalgarj in western Nepal were asked recently what they understood by the federalist issue holding up the constitution. 

A school building in Jorhpokhari, Panchitlar lies in ruins months after the 25 September earthquake

A boy inspects the burnt out skeleton of a bike during the three-day bandas in May called by Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities

Former Maoist combatants line up for the regrouping process in Chula Chuli, Ilam in November

A school building in Jorhpokhari, Panchitlar lies in ruins months after the 25 September earthquake

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Former Maoist combatants line up for the regrouping process in Chula Chuli, Ilam in November

Mahat, warned that political instability will make it difficult to get approval for increased spending without “full political consensus”. Mahat, who has been finance minister five times, could only present one-third of the total budget one year due to political stalemate. “In these cases, we can only pass a partial budget to ensure ongoing activities are not hampered. There cannot be a policy shift or new budgetary programs due to political turmoil, which creates economic uncertainty,” he explained.

The 2009-09 budget was delayed by two months, in 2010-11 it was four months late, as was the 2011-12 budget.

Late budgets choke off needed funds for development, said Chandan Sapkota, an economist at the South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment office in Kathmandu. “A delayed budget means a halt in work due to shortage of funds to pay for workers and materials. This usually leads to liquidity problem and halt in rural development work for several months,” Sapkota said. The UK Department for International Development (DfID) one of the country’s largest bilateral donors, has expressed concern about the loss of the parliamentary Public Accounts Committee. “We can’t take unnecessary risks with our money,” said Dominic O’Neill, DfID’s director in Nepal, local media reported. The donor has pledged $116 million from 2011 to 2015.

Delivery backlogs caused by strikes in May, coupled with rising fuel costs linked to an ongoing energy crisis and late payments by the state-owned oil company to its supplier in India, increased the World Food Program’s transport costs to get emergency food supplies to the mountains in the mid-west and far-west regions by up to 70 per cent in June, said the agency’s deputy director in Nepal, Nicolas Oberlin.

A 2009 regional breakdown of the Global Hunger Index, said Nepal’s mid-western mountain region had among the highest levels of hunger worldwide, just above the Democratic Republic of Congo in Central Africa.

At present Nepal is divided into five regions from east to west – Far West, Mid-West, West, Central and East - with control held by the central government in Kathmandu.

UN Resident Piper said the rise of aggressive identity-based politics and a recent increase in street violence have been troubling. “Federalism will not go away. This discussion will be revisited and needs to be managed differently,” he added.

The Disaster Management Act, five years in the making, was scheduled to be introduced shortly in parliament.

Andrew Martin, head of the humanitarian support unit at the Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in the capital, said those plans are now on hold.

“If a large earthquake happens in Kathmandu, government structures are insufficient. There is not enough capacity on disaster preparedness. Changing ministers and political insecurity leave people with a shallow knowledge of preparedness,” Martin said.

While 69 of Nepal’s 75 districts have local emergency response plans, there is still no plan detailing how international aid workers would quickly get staff and equipment into the country, who would set up emergency hospitals and channel electricity to camps for displaced persons, or how to track families - all points under negotiation.

Three weeks from the deadline for approving the 2013 budget, the NC’s Ram Sharan Mahat, warned that political instability will make it difficult to get approval for increased spending without “full political consensus”. Mahat, who has been finance minister five times, could only present one-third of the total budget one year due to political stalemate.

“The new government or the parliament can scrap, amend or endorse the bills,” said Ek Raj Bhandari, a former parliamentarian and coordinator of the legislative committee that finalises bills before parliamentary endorsement.

“Until then the bills will be there in the legislative committee.”

Sapana Pradhan-Malla said the impasse heightens political impunity and delays justice to the victims of conflict.

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A 2009 regional breakdown of the Global Hunger Index, said Nepal’s mid-western mountain region had among the highest levels of hunger worldwide, just above the Democratic Republic of Congo in Central Africa.

At present Nepal is divided into five regions from east to west – Far West, Mid-West, West, Central and East - with control held by the central government in Kathmandu.

UN Resident Piper said the rise of aggressive identity-based politics and a recent increase in street violence have been troubling. “Federalism will not go away. This discussion will be revisited and needs to be managed differently,” he added.

A community of farmers in Banbhair village, 20 kilometres outside of Nepalgarj in western Nepal were asked recently what they understood by the federalist issue holding up the constitution. Kul Bahadur Shahi, 53, asked: “What is a constitution?”

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Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai sought advice of legal experts regarding the budget and the November elections. Legal and constitutional experts including Attorney General Makhi Pradhan and his predecessors Raghav Lal Baidiya and Yubraj Sangraula were summoned by the prime minister on Tuesday.

“Article 88 and 93 allows the government to announce the budget through an ordinance after consulting with the president. But due to its limited mandate, presenting a full budget is not advisable,” explained Baidiya. Regarding voter’s registration, Baidiya said the government can introduce an ordinance to amend the Election Act as per Article 63 (7) of the interim constitution. President of Bar Association, Prem Bahadur Khadka, also maintained that the government cannot present more than one third of the budget as per the Supreme Court’s verdict.

However, vice-president Surendra Mahato differed in his views and said there is no legal obstacle to prevent the formulation of a full budget as per article 88. Advocate Ram Narayan Bidari too said the precedence cited in the Supreme Court’s verdict is only valid if there is a House of Representatives which cannot be misinterpreted in the present context.

The Supreme Court, on Sunday had turned down the writ petition filed by advocates seeking interim order against the government’s plan to produce the budget through an ordinance.

The Constituent Assembly was dissolved more than a month ago, but weeks of political deadlock have halted all progress. Although Prime Minister Bhattarai declared fresh elections before dissolving the CA, neither elections nor a future roadmap for the country is possible without consensus among the parties. The parties have no option than to work together to prevent the country from sliding down a slippery slope.

The parties have realised that terminating the CA due to differences on state restructuring without thinking of alternatives has been a big mistake. They are now bickering over it and blaming one another. But it is high time they stopped the blame game and mended ways to end the political vacuum.

Going to the polls to elect yet another jumbo CA for the completion of the remaining five per cent of the constitution writing won’t be accepted by the people. Therefore the best way forward is to reinitiate the CA for a certain time. However, the parties must guarantee that they will complete the writing within that timeframe. The country wouldn’t have been stuck in such a stalemate if the parties had shown foresight by discussing possible alternatives before ending the CA. If they fail to reach a consensus and resolve the crisis immediately, other elements may come into play and the parties will have nothing left to do except regret their indecisiveness.

Interview with NC leader Gagan Thapa. BBC Nepal Service, 26 June

**“Please spare us the trouble”**

**BBC: How do you assess the present political situation?**

**Gagan Thapa: The constitution was not drafted because of the rigid positions taken by a few men at the top. Now we are trying to get the same people to agree on the same issues, but none of them are willing to negotiate. I am not sure how this is going to work.**

**What do you propose then?**

**People who are not willing to negotiate with open minds must give way to those who are capable. I am not blaming the leaders entirely, because as a member of the CA, all of us are collectively responsible. But they were unable to forge consensus for the last four years, so I think it’s time they passed on the responsibility to those who are more competent.**

**But is it practical to expect the top brass to hand over the baton to others within the party?**

**People might think I am being impractical but refusing to look for alternatives because it’s not something we are used to won’t help either. Besides, how sensible is it to expect the same stubborn leaders to find consensus without retreating their positions?**

**Are you saying the older generation should give way to young leaders?**

**My views might not be representative of all youngsters, but I will tell you with great certainty that if our old leaders decide to retire tomorrow, even their children won’t lament their departure from Nepali politics.**

**Your recommendation seems highly unlikely. What are your other suggestions?**

**There is no historical precedence here, we are on our own. The parties have put forward three options: first, reinstating the CA through consensus, second, re-electing the CA and, third, electing the parliament which will then endorse the new constitution. But none of these alternatives can make the leaders change their inflexible attitudes. So how is that going to produce any result?**

**But have you and others tried to talk to the decision-makers in your party?**

**Yes we have. I am speaking in the media in order to reach out to the leaders. I urge the top brass of my party, Sushil Koirala and Ram Chandra Paudel, along with other leaders like Prachanda Kamal Dahal, Baburam Bhattarai, Jhala Nath Khanal, Madhaw Kumar Nepal, Bijay Gachhadar and Mahanta Thakur to spare this nation further trouble. Since they have been unable to pull this country out of stalemate, they need to trust other capable members in their parties.**
A small frame, a familiar smiling face as he walks around the corridors of the Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital (TUTH) is a source of inspiration to doctors as well as patients in a country where medical care is either too commercialised or too apathetic. At 55, Govinda KC has not only become the country’s leading orthopaedic surgeon but also a conscience keeper of the profession not just in Nepal, but in other parts of the world that are struck by natural disasters. The amazing thing is that KC doesn’t depend on donor funding, but pays his own way when he hears of earthquakes, floods or epidemics in Nepal, Pakistan, India, or even Haiti.

KC is now determined to treat not just the patients but also the sick management of TUTH, Nepal’s largest medical training institute. A frugal and humble man, KC is not married and lives in the modest staff quarters of the hospital. While most celebrity doctors in Nepal devote their attention to expensive private clinics and have done well for themselves, KC is true to his doctor’s oath and has dedicated his life to care and treatment of the needy. “It actually is selfish, decision,” KC says light-heartedly, “giving the profession all you have is the most fulfilling thing in life. Money can’t buy that level of personal satisfaction.”

Twice a year he travels to remote parts of Nepal, spending weeks conducting field clinics where he performs operations for those who can’t get to hospitals because they have sustained serious injuries during falls from trees and cliffs. KC has traveled to 75 districts and run medical camps in 60 of them, all of them from his own personal expense.

Mani Dhakal works in the Khotang District Hospital in Diktel, and was impressed with KC’s commitment to his profession. “Last year he travelled on foot from Okhaldhunga to Diktel, trained doctors in our hospital and proceeded to walk on to Bhojpur.”

Besides Nepal, KC packs his bags and is on the next plane whenever he hears of disasters in other parts of the world. In 2001, when a devastating earthquake hit India’s western state of Gujarat, KC spent three weeks in Bhuj treating the injured. He has also treated survivors of the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, where he returned last year to help flood victims. In 2008, he went to Buma to help survivors of Hurricane Nargis and in 2010 he was in Haiti after the earthquake when he performed 232 operations in three weeks.

KC says he saves enough to do these trips on his own, and sometimes accepts help from relief organisations. “Where there is a will there is a way,” he says, “all you need is the determination to help.”

While it is common for people to look for excuses to justify self-indulgence and ambitions, KC relishes the deep sense of satisfaction he derives from the care he can give. He says he considers it a privilege that he is in a position to be of help to others in distress. In a country where cynicism, selfishness and corruption are widespread, Govinda KC should be an inspiration not just for other doctors, but also for Nepal’s educated and privileged class. For a longer version of this story, see: Himal Khabarpatra.
As an Ass, it pains me to say this, but the country is going to the dogs. I have come to this conclusion based on the news report this week that street dogs have invaded and taken over the terminal building of Nepal’s only international airport. While the human citizens of this country have to go through elaborate security to enter what is euphemistically called an “airport”, canines can saunter in and out without showing any IDs. What if they are terrorists posing as dogs? And when police sniffer dogs are led into the baggage carousels to smell out explosives and drugs, the mongrels bark their heads off and try to chase them away. We must give it to the management for making KTM a unique tourist attraction by:

1. Allowing all kinds of fauna and flora to enrich the airport’s biodiversity, chuse monkeys have a free run of the departure concourse, rodents find their way into planes, and the runway was once invaded by a wild boar.

2. Having the most aromatic toilets this side of Suez, with odours that pervade the arrival area to acclimatise arriving tourists to the sights, sounds and smells of Nepal that awaits them outside.

3. Introducing the shortest bus ride between the plane and terminal building of any airport in the world (7.1 seconds) which definitely deserves to be in the Guinness Book.

4. There are other countries in Asia that have worse roads than Kathmandu, but we have the only airport in the region where the runways have potholes.

5. The Department of Irritation takes great pains to ensure that the immigration lines for tourists are as long as possible so as to give the impression that Nepal is a very popular destination and tourists are dying to get in.

6. This is the friskiest airport in Asia, with at least four pat downs between the time you enter the terminal and the time you enter the plane. New slogan: “Visit Nepal and Get Four Free Massages On Departure Performed by Experienced Masseuses”

But what PKD has in his favour is that he has all the moolah, and can buy any support he wants. Which is why it was important for Rain Man to remain as Finance Minister so he can treat the national treasury as a party war chest. Being the cunning Bahun that he is, one can’t count Awesome out yet. His strategy has always been to present himself as the main obstacle to any agreement so that he is therefore also key to any solution. Works brilliantly every time: by being a part of the problem the others have to include you as a part of the solution.

Looks like our comrades got an earful from visiting Comrade Ai Ping of the international dept of the Chinese Commie Party who took a dim view, especially of PKD’s penchant for ethnic politics. Ping told Dahal “not to make the mistakes Mao made by dividing China up into autonomous ethnic regions”. Chairman Maximus seems to have got the message, especially after he heard that Ping’s tete-e-tete with Kiran Kaka lasted 1 hour while his meeting was only 45 minutes.

It’s not just Com Fearsome who is being snubbed by the Chinese, Ping didn’t bother to call on BRB either. And the PM got the cold shoulder from Wen Jiabao who refused even a photo op with him at Rio Minus 20. This is even more glaring because Premier Wen had all the time in the world to meet other world leaders, including Comrade Thinley of Bhutan who is lobbying for membership of the Security Council later this year.