Nepal has hunkered down for the monsoon, and the country seems to handle along despite the lack of a constitution, a budget, and a parliament. Everything is tied up with political negotiations over a successor to the Bhattarai government, and positions in the next cabinet. The prime minister seems to be hung up on hanging on, and the NC will have to come up with something better than just to say “It’s our turn”. However desirable an all-party government may be, the reality is that the parties are hopelessly split among and within themselves. Prime Minister Bhattarai has to weigh whether stepping down will clear this log jam, pave the way for elections, and restore a stable state.

Editorial
Four legs good

On a tight budget
by Rubeena Mahato

Show me the money
My Two Paisa
by Paavan Mathema

Rain check

After climbing Mt Everest, seven Nepali women are climbing the seven highest peaks in seven continents. They have four more to go.

7 WOMEN SUMMITS

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page 6-7
ny democratic nation state is supposed to have three legs: the executive, the judiciary and the legislative. To this some have added a fourth leg, although it looks suspiciously like a self-important media has included itself.

For the chair to be stable, all four legs have to be strong. One wobbly leg makes all the others rickety as well, and the chair itself becomes unbalanced. In Nepal, the chair of state has always been unbalanced, be it during the king’s era or the republic. One wobbly leg makes all the others rickety as well, and the chair itself becomes unbalanced. In Nepal, the chair of state has always been unbalanced, be it during the king’s era or the republic.

To make things worse, constitutional bodies are also soon going to be headless as incumbents retire. The acting chief election commissioner is due to step down on the very month there are supposed to be CA elections in November, and the Public Service Commission will also soon have no chief. The anti-corruption watchdog, the CIAA, has been without a head since 2007.

If all this wasn’t bad enough, there is a huge crisis looming in the civil service as a dozen senior secretaries face mandatory retirement later this year. Leaving aside the absurdity of retiring off bureaucrats who have amassed a wealth of experience and maturity, and are in the prime of their career, there is also the issue of the impact such a mass exodus will have on the civil service which has been holding together during this prolonged period of political instability.

(See ‘On a tight budget’, page 4)

Prime Minister Bhattarai may have to weigh whether stepping down will clear the current deadlock, pave the way for elections, and restore a stable state.

Among the 12 retirees, only one gets to stay on if selected to be chief secretary. Fortunately, the candidates said to be most likely to get the top job not just have political connections, but are both competent. The names of Irrigation Secretary Brinda Hada and Industry Secretary Umakant Jha are being floated as likely candidates for the chief secretary’s post. Since all 12 have equal seniority, it seems likely that the appointment will boil down to political give-and-take.

All this is reason enough for concern because the current deadlock in the political arena has dragged the budget. Prime Minister Bhattarai wants a full-fledged budget of about Rs 430 billion, so he can kick-start development and get the economy going. The NC and UML smell a rat, and suspect he wants to influence elections by allocating pork-barrel funds. A one-third expenditure plan of the actual budget last fiscal year will take care of government salaries and essential development projects. The private sector is understandably worried that budgetary uncertainties will hit investment.

To be sure, nowhere does a caretaker government in the absence of a parliament have the right to announce a full budget by ordinance. It will have to pass a budget that just meets regular expenditures until elections are held, and that is probably what will happen. But for that the civil service has to be efficient and experienced.

The budget, constitutional and civil appointments are all tied to political negotiations over a successor to the Bhattarai government and how to divide up the cabinet. The prime minister seems to be hung up on hanging on, and the NC and UML have to come to an agreement better than just to say “It’s our turn.” In fact, the NC can’t even agree on its own prime ministerial candidate.

However undesirable an all-party government may be, the reality is that the parties are hopelessly split among and within themselves. Prime Minister Bhattarai has to weigh whether stepping down will clear this logjam, pave the way for elections, and restore a stable state.
Grab what you can

Let’s face it, the Maoists never wanted a constitution, they just wanted to grab power out deliberately for attack by a Maoist-supported banda in Kathmandu enforced by the Janajati Mahasangh. It was an experiment to cow down the media and it worked. The Maoists held on to their chip. They used the Constituent Assembly as a proxy forum for identity politics. The truth is that they never wanted a constitution, they have always only wanted to grab as much power as possible by whatever means possible.

The only institutions standing in the way of power now are the media, the Supreme Court, Nepal Army, some sections of civil society and the office of the president. The Maoists are trying to pick off one by one. They have bought into tv, print and radio, they are trying to undermine the courts and they are interfering openly with the army’s command structure.

During the week before May 27, reporters were singled out deliberately for attack by a Maoist-supported banda in Kathmandu enforced by the Janajati Mahasangh. It was an experiment to cow down the media and it worked. The Maoists held on to their chip. They used the Constituent Assembly as a proxy forum for identity politics. The truth is that they never wanted a constitution, they have always only wanted to grab as much power as possible by whatever means possible.

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On a tight budget

Budgetary uncertainties and mass retirement of secretaries will set back governance

RUBEEA MAHATO

Increasing pressure from the opposition parties has forced Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai to back out from his decision of bringing a full-fledged budget. Coupled with the mass retirement of twelve experienced senior civil servants, this has added to worries that governance in this country will suffer a further setback.

An all party meeting called by Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal on Tuesday decided to approve a truncated budget, after the opposition boycotted a similar meeting called by Bhattarai. This has fed speculation that the budget has become a game of ping-pong in the intra-party rivalry between Bhattarai and Dahal.

Despite the agreement on a limited budget, the controversy is far from over. There is still disagreement over whether to bring a partial or a one-third budget and there is strong lobbying going on by the FNCCI (Federation of Nepal Chamber of Commerce and Industry) for a full budget. Even if a limited budget is passed now, constitutional provisions require it to be endorsed by the parliament within six months.

PM Bhattarai it seems has only reluctantly agreed to a partial budget after all-round opposition, including from his own party, forced him to back down. Bhattarai had been firm on his stance on a full budget until recently, and had support from the business community. He even threatened to bring the budget through an ordinance if the president, but the all party meeting hosted by Dahal was the last straw.

Those supporting the full budget say that because the economy is already in a bad shape, anything less than a full budget would further aggravate the slowdown.

The private sector, headed by the FNCCI is taking this line and has been lobbying the government to ensure the health of the economy. "Rameshore Khanal, former finance secretary and adviser to the prime minister told Nepal Times.

The opposition parties believe the Baburam government has its eyes on the election and influence the election. This is not unlikely given past misappropriation of the prime minister’s pet project, the Youth Self Employment Fund, which was used to distribute money to Maoist cadres. The Maoists are also accused of siphoning off the resettlement funds for their ex-guerillas by inflating numbers and doling out money to phantom fighters.

A caretaker government is not supposed to stay in power more than three months and preparing a budget for the full year sends a bad message, critics argue.

Says economic analyst Chandan Sapkota: “Not having a full budget would not significantly dent growth prospects, given the slow pace of the economy. A one-third budget will take care of salaries for government employees, meet our debt obligations, finance elections, and provide partial funding to major ongoing development work.”

Even the Rs 10 billion requested for the full year sends a bad message, critics argue.

Now the PM and the opposition are in deadlock. A caretaker government is not supposed to stay in power more than three months and preparing a budget for the full year sends a bad message, critics argue.

Says Sapkota: “Not having a full budget would not significantly dent growth prospects, given the slow pace of the economy. A one-third budget will take care of salaries for government employees, meet our debt obligations, finance elections, and provide partial funding to major ongoing development work.”

Even the Rs 10 billion requested by the Election Commission can be included.

Having a full budget is also problematic at a time when a dozen government secretaries are retiring en masse. Four secretaries have already retired a month ago and the cabinet has promoted new officials in their place. Those promoted are Durganidhi Sharma, Gyandarshan Udas, Dhan Bahadur Tamang and Surya Prasad Silwal. Looking at the list, it seems the government did not make an effort to be more inclusive in its selection.

All other secretaries, except for the one bureaucrat who will get promoted to the post of chief secretary, are to leave office on 30 September, which is why the top post is being fiercely contested. And as usual, the political parties are already lobbying for their candidates, and competition has also started for the soon to be vacant secretarial posts.

Other incumbent secretaries are tight-lipped about their future plans, but the final shortlist for chief secretary is expected to include Umakant Jha and Brinda Hada who are being tipped as a Janjati close to the PMO. But if the prime minister steps down and the Maoist-Madhesi coalition is replaced by an all-party government, then all bets are off again.

But what worries many in and out of government is the lack of budgetary oversight during the caretaker period with so many efficient and experienced secretaries retiring all at once. The new appointees will be relatively less inexperienced, and bureaucratic turnover can be accompanied by irregularities in budget spending especially if the full budget is passed.

Says Sapkota: "I fear the ministers and the cabinet will waste their budget allocations since there will be so little oversight. The joint secretaries and others below them will pretty much have to agree to what the minister says or else their chances of promotion will go down.”

Kathmandu District


Outside Kathmandu Districts


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After weeks of deliberations, the government gave up its intention to bring out a full budget on Tuesday and agreed with the opposition on a one-third budget instead.

The government should have been preparing for the announcement of a full budget now, which is expected to be approximately Rs 429 billion. The fiscal year ends on Sunday, but the parties have only agreed on a partial plan. The opposition fears that a budget before the election will be a populist one, and there are several debatable issues. It will take them days or even weeks to reach consensus on the nitty-gritty of the budget.

Perhaps we should be glad that at least some progress is being made to bring out the budget. Even if the Bhattarai government had been allowed to bring a full budget, its implementation by a caretaker government would have been questionable.

We should be used to this by now. Since 2006 the country’s budget has been held hostage by the opposition on one issue or the other every year, sometimes even ending in embarrassing fist fights. Looking at the trend, we might as well change our fiscal calendar permanently. The economy be damned, the opposition parties will not give up the chance to bargain on the budget.

But halting it will put a major speed bump on the country’s development and growth. This delay has come at a time when the confidence of the business community is already seeing a sharp decline. The missed deadline for the constitution crashed hopes of investors who were finally expecting some stability. Banks still have not experienced a rise in credit demands, reflecting the sentiments of the investors. The real inflation rate is estimated to be in double digits now.

The delay and squabbles over the budget represent another lost opportunity for Nepal. No investor, local or foreign, will want to take a chance on a country with a highly volatile political environment where risks seem to crop up at every corner.

The central bank is trying to manage the impact of the European crisis on the economy and rising inflation, and without a budget it will not be able to make monetary policy changes to mitigate the situation. It’s sad that our politicians, even former finance ministers, do not realise the magnitude of our economic conundrum.

The partial budget will only take care of regular expenses like social security, salary, debt servicing and projected costs to national priority projects. But the economy is passing through a difficult phase and a timely and complete budget could have given it the boost it so desperately needed.

We can only hope that before the partial budget runs out, the parties will come to an agreement which will in turn help stabilise the country’s economy. Fingers crossed.
After seven years as a journalist, 29-year-old Shailee Basnet no longer felt the same passion and drive for the profession. She decided there is a higher calling in her life: to climb the tallest mountains in all seven continents, and set an example for other women climbers.

Basnet was among the 10 Nepali women who ascended Mt Everest in May 2008 as part of the First Inclusive Women Sagarmatha Expedition (see box). During their gruelling 45 day trek, Basnet, Pujan Acharya, Maya Gurung (pictured right, on Mt Elbrus), Avita Komari Singh, Nimdona Sherpa, Pema Diki Sherpa, and Chunu Shrestha became close friends and met in Thamel every week to catch up.

On 1 January 2009, the seven friends formed the Everest Women Seven Summits Eco-Action team and mapped out their future plans. “It was our New Year resolution of sorts,” Basnet explains. “We didn’t want to go back to our normal lives. We wanted to fulfil bigger dreams and inspire people.”

In 2010, the team scaled Mt Kosciuszko in Australia and Mt Elbrus in Russia. Africa’s Mt Kilimanjaro is next on their to-do-list for spring 2013. The United Nations World Food Programme has agreed to sponsor a part of the Kilimanjaro climb and the team is offering public hikes every Saturday to hills near Kathmandu Valley to raise the remaining amount.

However, their journey to the top has been an uphill battle and they have had to overcome immense personal and financial obstacles. Pema, 24, and Nimdona, 21, belong to poor families. Nimdona’s father died when she was 15 and she has been supporting her family ever since. 33-year-old Gurung ran away from her home in Sindhupalchok at 14 when she found out her family was planning to marry her off.

Even after their successful climb of Mt Everest, funding for their Mt Elbrus trip was hard to come by and they had to use their personal savings to cover half of the two million budget.

Conquering the three summits not only bought them fame and recognition, but also gave the women an opportunity to fight gender stereotypes and break new grounds.

In the male-dominated world of climbing, only 5% out of the 300 climbers who have scaled the seven peaks are women. And despite the rise in female trekking guides and climbers in Nepal, there is an immense gender disparity with men far outnumbering women in mountaineering expeditions.

“Before Everest, the older generation in particular had a hard time accepting us. They seemed uncomfortable with the idea of young, female mountaineers. They would ask us why we are climbing mountains, instead of finding ‘regular’ jobs, earning money, or getting married,” says Pema.

“But now people listen to us,” adds Basnet proudly. “They say you have climbed Everest, now you can do anything.”

Today the women are role models both at home and abroad. They have visited more than 100 schools across Nepal as well as universities in the US and Australia where they talk about their achievements, setbacks and the value of hard work and perseverance. Gurung, who dreams of transforming the lives of women in her trafficking-plagued district will be speaking to Nepalis living in Singapore and Malaysia in July.

Everywhere the women go, the response is overwhelming and students say they feel hopeful about pursuing dreams they once thought were impossible.

“Many young Nepali girls have low self-esteem and hesitate to follow their dreams,” says Chunu Shrestha. “We want to reach out and tell them that if they believe in themselves, they can achieve their goals and do as well as men. Even physically and mentally demanding tasks like climbing Mt Everest is not out of reach.”

www.sevensummitswomen.org

Nepali women climbers set the pace, #590

Having climbed the highest peaks in Asia, Australia and Europe, the Nepali women mountaineers have four more to conquer
Ascent to the top of the world

After an intensive 10-month training programme that involved rock climbing, ice-slamming and running at high altitudes, the team of 10 Nepali women from diverse ethnic communities summited Mt Everest on 25 May 2008. Before them, only seven Nepali women had reached the top on separate occasions. The expedition was organised by veteran mountaineers like Pemba Dorje Sherpa, DaGombu Sherpa and Sumita Maskey.

The highest mountain in each of the continent:

- Mt Everest at 8848m in Nepal (Asia)
- Mt Kilimanjaro at 5892m in Tanzania (Africa)
- Mt Elbrus at 5642m in Russia (Europe)
- Mt Kosciuszko at 2228m in Australia
- Mt Aconcagua at 6962m in Argentina (South America)
- Mt Vinson Massif at 4892m in Antarctica
- Mt McKinley at 6194m in Alaska (North America)

Nepal’s UN mission has its work cut out

Nepal is set to remain on the list of ‘least developed’ countries for some time yet.

ABHA ELI PHOBOO in GENEVA

Here in Geneva, surrounded by news of Europe’s falling economy and rising unemployment, a woman with a baby holds out a cup in the train near the Nepal mission to the UN, and an elderly man begs for spare change on the sidewalk.

The United Nations in Geneva is the world that houses the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Health Organisation (WHO).

It maintains bilateral diplomatic relations with Switzerland, Italy, and Croatia and also seeks to serve diaspora Nepalis in the area, and promote Nepal as a tourist destination.

Bairagi says while political awareness runs high in Nepal with the media and civil society actively engaging in public debate, there isn’t enough done to promote economic development, and prioritise agriculture.

Last year, Nepal coordinated the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Nations in Istanbul with Bairagi in the expert-level committee. There are still 48 countries on the ‘least developed’ list, and the goal is to halve the number by 2020. Maldives has already graduated, and a few others are close to meeting the requirements.

“Nepal’s performance has not been bad,” Bairagi says carefully, “but we need national commitment and efficient implementation of policies. The planning and strategies are down on paper, the question is of action and partnership.”

Bairagi finds a lot of work has to do with trade-led growth, and joining other developing nations in the negotiations at multilateral trade fora for duty-free, quota-free, non-restrictive access to markets in developed nations. The career diplomat has served at the UN in New York and at the EU in Brussels. He helped set up the Nepali embassy in Canberra.

Bairagi adds: “It is important to have a national target with the goal of being self-sufficient. And this can only be achieved with a right mix of policies, institutions and resources.”

Without that, Nepal seems fated to remain one of the few countries from Asia in the list of ‘least developed’ countries for some time yet.
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, 9am to 3pm, Jhamsikhel

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

JAMUNKO RUKH, don’t miss this drama for street children organised by Koseli School and Gari Khana Dev, Rs 200 (for adults) and Rs 100 (for students), 14 to 15 July, 3pm, Vipra Hotel, Swyambhunath

Kathmandu Kora Cycling Challenge 2012, cycle a full circle around Kathmandu valley to raise money for Save the Children. Register at www. kora.com.np/kathmandu-kora, 21 July, 6.45 am, starting at Patan Durbar Square, 4412508 or email kora@socialtours. com

Shuffle Party, shuffle the night away with music by DJ Pujan and Niral, Rs 300 (pre sales) or Rs 500 (door), 21 July, 7pm to 12am, Tipsy Bar and Lounge, Durbarmarg

MUSIC

ASARAI MANAMA, celebrate traditional Nepali music this Asar with Rock Star, Rs 300, 10 July, 7.15 pm onwards, House of Music, Thamel

MONKEY TEMPLE, catch Monkey Temple’s brand new album ‘Shades of Grey’ as they perform live, Rs 350, 20 July, 7.45 pm, Trisara Restro and Bar, Lazimpat

74th Yalamaya Classic, catch two classical music performances to unwind this summer, 17 July, 5pm onwards, Dogghatnaha, Yalamaya Kendra, Patan Dhoka, 5533767

DINING

CAFE U, a homely ambiance with a fusion of Japanese and Filipino delights, Closed on Tuesdays, Sankha

LA ROTISSERIE, get your fill of roasted delights like chicken, duck and trout, Jawalakhel

Dragen Cafe, enjoy momos, sizzlers and vegetable coins at the most reasonable prices, Kumari pati

SUMMIT HOTEL, savour the succulent ribs basket, and add the finishing touch with a hot Dutch apple pie, Jhamsikhel, 5521810

Singma Food Court, for the best Singaporean and Malaysian cuisine in town, Pulchowk, 2556092 and Bhatbhatheni, 4411078

BOUDHA STUPA RESTAURANT & CAFE, enjoy wood-fired pizza, homemade pastas and the one and only Tibetan gyakok, Boudha, 012130681, 9841484408

Events

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Saffron

Saffron opened its doors over eight months ago, yet it retains an air of newness. The walls are unadorned, Saffron looks quite astounded when people don’t know about its existence.

As it is situated in the Trade Tower Nepal Complex in Thapathali many people don’t know about its existence.

Saffron lacks charm, but maybe its attraction is in not trying to be anything it isn’t. It’s basic, but very conveniently placed to grab a quick bite for lunch after looking through the newest model of cars on display on that section of the road or attending a business meeting.

While the place was definitely a let-down, the food was surprisingly good. A quick word of advice: do not decide on what to eat by reading the menu, for half the things on offer weren’t available, so we resorted to asking our server and went by his recommendations. The Buff Momos (Rs 90) were hot and satisfying. And their take on Chicken Sandeko (Rs 150) was deeply fried crispy chicken bits. The Fall Momos (Rs 90) were hot and satisfying. The Chicken a la King (Rs 180) and Pasta with Chicken and Creamy Sauce (Rs 150). While cream can be used to disguise and mask a multitude of faults, and let’s be honest, it can make everything taste better, Saffron did not rely on cream to salvage its dishes. The pasta was perfectly al dente and did not sink under the weight of the sauce. The thin strips of carrot and capsicum added texture as to be seasoned throughout and not so dry, but overall the dish was perfectly acceptable.

Saffron does not have a dessert menu but you can order a variety of coffee-hot, cold or iced from the café downstairs. We chose the Sweet Lassi (Rs 50) and that came well-blended and chilled, perfect for the hot, muggy weather.

Saffron’s price is what made us really happy. Our entire meal came to Rs 770, which is a bargain in today’s age where eating out is fast becoming a luxury because of the exorbitant prices charged by most restaurants. It is clean, has air conditioning, lots of icy cold water and the waiters were very eager, once they got over their initial surprise.

Ruby Tuesday
illness. surprisingly many fall ill high altitude, and not (low oxygen) caused by prepared for the hypoxia are unaware of and ill

Most of these pilgrims mountain and bathe in the circumambulate the sacred Buddhists, and Jains Asia is Mount Kailash. Sometimes the strongly devout and have concomitant illnesses. Many of the pilgrims are elderly having altitude sickness and unknown in Kailash. Often the extent of the problem is there are no records, especially as it is a very sensitive and difficult issue.

The monsoon is now cooking up second wave, and it’s enormous and swells with its power. The average daily rainfall in July should be up to 25 mm, but we are getting nothing but the occasional drizzle. The relief precipitation, which is supposed to help farmers and sustain crops, comes in short bursts. Pullhans did get unusually heavy precipitation on Wednesday night. Raining the seti. The weather has been erratic across the world; this summer with unprecedented heat waves in North America, a deadly heat wave in India and Northern China, and all the air travel problems for us in Nepal with a fresh surge of a new variant of coronavirus that we see in the satellite radar composite taken on Thursday morning.

Pilgrimage medicine

probably the most visited and arduous high altitude pilgrimage site in South Asia is Mount Kailash, 6714m), the centre of the universe in Vedic thinking, where thousands of Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains circumambulate the sacred mountain and bathe in the nearby Lake Mansarovar (4560m) every year. Most high-altitude pilgrims are unaware of and ill prepared for the hypoxia (low oxygen) caused by high altitude, and not surprisingly many fall ill and some succumb to their illness. Unfortunately, because there are no records, the extent of the problem is unknown in Kailash. Often patients are misdiagnosed as having altitude sickness and treated incorrectly. In addition, many of the pilgrims are elderly and have concomitant illnesses. Sometimes the strongly devout pilgrims feel privileged to die in the precincts of the holy mountain and do not want interventions. Indeed, many factors conspire to work against the safety and rescue of these pilgrims.

But closer to Kathmandu is Gosainkunda. On 1 August, the eve of Janai Purnima, Gosainkunda Lake (4380m) will be the venue for the climactic enactment of the greatest Vedic tradition.

In their quest for amrit (the elixir for spiritual immortality), they dive into the lake and wash away the dirt of the ocean, the first thing to rise was Kalakut, a deadly poison. It is after the tragic and mysterious Leonard Cohen song of the same name, lovingly translated from a poem of Federico Garcia Lorca. Needless to say, the song does make an unforgettable appearance in the film in a montage of slow moving 360 degree shots that dissolve into each other and convey the burning heat and the slow simmering down of a new and passionate relationship.

The song, perhaps one of the most enigmatic ever written, ends with these lines: And you’ll carry me down on your dancing

Life is never wrapped up in the neat formula of the romantic comedy, and while Take This Waltz is not perfect, it still has a ragged beauty and mystery that is best taken with a measure of wonder and a certain acceptance. All DVD reviews in this column are available at: Music and Expression, Thamel, Phone # 014700092

Watch trailer

RISKY RESCUE: A microbe, which met with an accident in Rubakanda along the Bhimdatta Highway in Doti two weeks ago, being pulled out on Sunday. Eleven passengers were killed in the accident.

DIRT RIDE: A motorbike struggles through Kalkistan road which is under construction on Tuesday.

TALK TIME: A farmer in her field in Harisiddhi, Lalitpur, takes a break from planting rice on Tuesday.
It’s your mess, clean it up

It doesn’t matter whether this government remains or goes because the next one will face the same deadlock.

The glaring loopholes in the interim constitution provide a lot of elbow room for the political parties to undo the mess they created by letting the CA lapse on 27 May. They must use these to clean up instead of waiting for someone else to do it.

Although they mean and grow about it, almost everyone is happy with the postponement of the constitution. The opposition NC and UML got what they wanted, they have reduced the government to a lame duck that can neither bring a full budget nor prepare for elections. The Maoist-Madhesi coalition led by Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai seems fairly certain they won’t have to step down any time soon.

The election commission has said that it will not be possible to hold polls by 22 November unless the parties sort out their squabbling and amend the constitution in the next 10 days.

On Tuesday, Bhattarai called an all party meeting with four very specific agendas: budget, new government elections and constitution. The opposition parties boycotted the meeting, but attended the all party meeting called by Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal at BICC, the same evening.

Besides bringing the Dahal-Bhattarai competition for power is making everybody, including his own party leadership, uncomfortable. But whatever comes to power next will also be unchallenged, except under two conditions: reviving the CA which will then pave way for the declaration of the constitution or holding the CA elections in November.

Many, including opposition leaders, intellectuals and legal experts have rejected the possibility of reviving the house. They argue that a dead institution cannot be revived. Similarly, on the question of the next CA elections, they maintain that the last four years of exercise proved to be an expensive ‘misadventure’ and therefore a new way must be found. While the proposition has been able to cash in on the immediate resentment of the public, it is still an undemocratic and unconstitutional one.

To begin with, the Supreme Court and legal experts have to take note that Article 64, under which the CA was dissolved runs counter to Article 82 which states that the CA will be dissolved on the day it promulgates a new constitution, not before that.

Nowhere in the 22 page long verdict that supposedly sealed the fate of the CA has the Supreme Court cleared this ambiguity.

Besides, there is also Article 138 which gives the cabinet the right to remove any difficulties while implementing the provisions in the constitution, provided it is endorsed by the House within a month. So if there is a political consensus among the parties, the cabinet can revive the house and seek its endorsement within 30 days.

This is not wishful thinking, these are perfectly legitimate legal loopholes in the interim constitution that the parties can use to undo their blunder if they want to avoid another expensive ‘misadventure’.

The opposition must stop provoking the president to overstep his jurisdiction of a ceremonial role and negotiate its terms fair and square.

The NC and UML leaders have been speaking in public that the next elections, whenever they are held, should be for a parliament which would then form an ‘expert panel’ to give final shape to the constitution. The interim constitution of 2007, however, does not envision a constitution drafted by any other body except a constituent assembly.

If the opposition is aware there is no alternative to reviving the house or going for new CA elections in order to declare a statute, why is it rejecting both propositions? We will see as the monsoon drags on how long the present government can survive, but it doesn’t seem to matter who is in Singh Durbar anymore.

The fate of the government is inextricably tied to the fate of the Constituent Assembly because it is the basis of a new and inclusive Nepal we all fought for, and dreamed of.
Sindhupalchok may be only 100km from the capital, but subsistence farmers here may as well be in remote farwestern Nepal. Maize farmers couldn’t be bothered about the political stalemate in Kathmandu; they are more worried about their dying crops.

For 55-year-old Dhanmaya Tamang and her family in Harekolpata village, a weak monsoon has hit their only income source. “At least we had hopes from the gods. But they have also abandoned us this year,” Dhanmaya said.

Usually by July each household has 200 to 400 kg of maize depending on farm size, enough to feed the family and bring in extra cash. This time, it’s not even 20 kg, barely enough to last a week.

The Central Region, which includes Sindhupalchok District, fared well in last year’s July-September harvest, seeing a 16 per cent growth in both rice and maize cultivation, according to the World Food Programme (WFP). This year, dozens of families in Harekolpata are planning to send their children over the mountain to Bhaktapur to find work.

“We have no choice but to ask them to leave school this year,” said 40-year-old farmer Kajiman Tamang, father of two sons. The destitution so close to Kathmandu is a result of government neglect, the war and the lack of local elections for the past 15 years.

“We lost 20 years of opportunity to develop our nation due to the decade long war and then an unsuccessful peace process that has only ended up with the major political parties fighting for power,” said Sirupati Pakhrin, who used to work with Sindhupalchok DDC.

For each of Nepal’s 3,900
ABANDONED FARMERS: Families in Sindhupalchok bemoan the lack of local governance since 1997 and subsequent lack of government investment in irrigation

even the more productive farms will be at risk, according to the government’s District Agricultural Office in Chautara.

“The only way to improve our farms without waiting for the rain is irrigation. The central government has promised it for so many years, but nothing has happened,” said Jitman Tamang, 40, whose half hectare of maize plants shrivelled with the late rains.

Less than half of Nepal’s cultivable land is irrigated. Rural Nepalis who asked what their village needed the most used to say “roads”, but as the road network spreads, they now say “irrigation”.

Meanwhile, 60km away in the western Tarai district of Kailali, a region known for its relative stability, farmer Kul Bahadar Shahi, 53, said he remembered when officials came from the land survey department 16 years ago. “Since then no one has come back. No one is really listening. Politicians take care of their own VDC.”

When asked about his elected representative in the recently dissolved national CA, he said: “Our leader had a low profile and was not much help.”

“After two consecutive years of surplus, Nepal’s food security and incomes have improved, but many farmers have still not planted seedlings. A weak planting season is supposed to kick-start agriculture; instead, farmers are in cahoots with smugglers and merchants, which is why they don’t want to stop the black market trade. Poor governance and instability have contributed to the crisis.”

Farmers who queue up all day say there is plenty of fertiliser being hoarded and sold at exorbitant prices. Most are convinced government officials are in cahoots with smugglers and merchants, which is why they don’t want to stop the black market trade. Poor governance and instability have contributed to the crisis.

Seeds of wrath

The rice planting season was supposed to officially begin two weeks ago, but many farmers have still not planted seedlings. A weak monsoon and a critical lack of chemical fertilisers have kept many terrace farms fallow this season.

The state supplies only 150,000 metric tons of chemical fertilisers at subsidised rates every year, but the estimated annual demand is more than 700,000 metric tons. In addition, the government’s cheap fertiliser never arrives in time for the planting season, and farmers are forced to buy smuggled fertiliser from India in the black market. A staggering 80 per cent of the fertiliser used in Nepal is smuggled across the border from India.

This year, farmers have nearly given up hope, and by the time the fertiliser arrives they know it will be too little too late. And with police getting strict at the border, even the smuggled fertiliser supplies have dried up and when they are available they are too expensive.

Meanwhile, the Agricultural Inputs Company cannot fulfil the demand because of lack of funds for subsidies. The amount it imports suffers from anomalies in the tender system, the only short-term solution is to increase imports,” says Hari Dahal, spokesman for the Ministry of Agriculture.

Farmers here and elsewhere in Nepal have stopped expecting anything from the government. “We have no choice but to rely on each other because we have survived without a government for the last 20 years,” said Uttam Khadka, a local hotelier.

Sindhupalchok has been classified a ‘food insecure’ district by the Ministry of Agriculture - where people do not have access to enough food to keep them healthy - but with unpredictable rains
Does Nepal need a Janajati party?

Interview with sociologist Krishna Bhattachan and UML leader Kripasur Sherpa in BBC Nepali Service, 7 July

BBC: What are the reasons behind starting an ethnic (janajati) political party? Krishna Bhattachan: Your question is biased to begin with. We are forming a national party that will unite the voices of the Dalits and Janajatis and end 240 years of internal colonisation and marginalisation of the backward communities. Unlike the bigger parties, our new party will not be run by people belonging to a particular gender, class or caste. Kripasur Sherpa: Instead of forging unity among Nepal’s diverse ethnic groups, the ones trying to create a Janajati party are misleading the public by selling caste and ethnicity. But politics functions on ideology and agendas, not on narrowly defined identities. How differently would such a party address the demands of the Janajatis? Bhattachan: The party will fight for social justice and work towards bringing marginalised communities into the national mainstream. We will also demand for a fully proportional representation system at all levels of the state machinery.

Are you talking of priority rights? No, we are talking about an inclusive state as defined and advocated by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Why is decision-making in all major political parties dominated exclusively by Brahmins and Chettras? Sherpa: The leaders represent their parties and respective ideologies, not their caste groups. If the Janajati leaders have been unable to influence party decisions, it is their own fault. They have to be more assertive.

How will the new party address marginalisation within the Janajatis and Dalits? Bhattachan: There are multiple levels of marginalisation within Nepal society out of which caste and gender based exclusion is the most severe. If we are to make the country more inclusive, we must first address the question of caste and gender and then other forms of oppression within them including class-based marginalisation.

There are already Madhes based parties which deal with regional issues, so what is the harm in having an ethnic party which works on behalf of ethnic groups? Sherpa: The problem is not the party or its agendas, but the approach. Identity is an issue that must be debated and addressed but it should not jeopardise the social harmony that exists between different communities in Nepal. Besides, a party that has no ideology and philosophy and focuses only on caste issues cannot last long in politics.

Bhattachan: It is wrong to assume that a Janajati party cannot have an ideology or philosophy. The party’s main objective should be to provide a voice for marginalised communities while following the principles of socialism, human rights and inclusion.

“PM is being dragged into controversies”

Devendra Paudel, political advisor of the prime minister in Naya Patrika, 8 July

Allegations that Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai has changed our neighbour, but to blame the party split on Bhattarai’s increasing closeness to India is complete nonsense. It’s just a ploy to make him look bad. Anti-government elements have been unnecessarily dragging the PM into controversies. The handing over of Tribhuvan International Airport’s management to India, for example, is being blown out of proportion. The government was also talking with Chinese and Korean companies on TIA’s management and the decision hasn’t been finalised yet.

The government fully understands Nepal’s security needs. But we cannot move ahead by closing ourselves to the outside world while doing nothing on our own. If we want economic development, we have to insure the safety of foreign investments.

The prime minister was also wrongly criticised for signing the BIPPA (Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection) agreement with China but they have similar deals with 160 other countries. There is no point in saying BIPPA is against our national interest.

There is also no truth in stories about problems between Chairman Dahal and Prime Minister Bhattarai. They have differing views on some issues which they are trying to sort out. But in terms of the ideology, working style and the party’s fundamental policies, they are still very close.

Guardian king

Interview with Gyanendra Shah in News24 Television Channel, 9 July

The parties have blamed you for trying to opiace the public in the pretext of religious gatherings. How do you respond to that? I go because I am invited by the people to participate in religious functions. What others say does not change the fact. People take time to meet me and share their problems. I don’t know why they (parties) are scared. I did not call anybody because if I had you would see more people.

As a common citizen, how do you assess the present political situation in the country? Obviously, I am not happy because the parties promised a lot but did not deliver anything. Now people are looking for a breakthrough and it is time to focus our energy towards that.

Does it mean you will be more assertive about your role in the present context or remain silent? Our gods are also made of stones and remain silent but it does not mean they are mute spectators. When the time comes, even the stones speak up. If people want me back, I am ready to provide leadership.

You have said before that the parties have broken the deal and unfairly ousted the monarchy but have not divulged further information. Can you tell us who signed the deal and what was in it? The seven parties had signed a three to four point deal with me in which they agreed to work as per the 1990 constitution and retain a constitutional monarchy. I kept my part of the deal by stepping down but when the seven parties became eight, they unilaterally abolished the monarchy.

Don’t you think it was your fault that led to the downfall of the monarchy? That is not true. But sometimes I feel I should have been more restrained in my approach. Things got out of hand quickly and people suffered. That was not my intention.

Should there be a referendum on whether to reinstate the monarchy? Was there one when it was done away with? No. The monarchy should be an institution that is neutral and plays a guardian role but I do not wish to be active.
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Corrodes, arabs and kharabs

The current political system in the Plutocratic Federal Demographic Republic of Nepal can be best described as ‘Crony Communism’, where ex-revolutionaries have turned into oligarchs. But murderers becoming kleptocrats is good, no? The Baddie-Deshi Coalition pocketing budgetary allocations for party and personal needs is not news anymore because it is so commonplace. Which is why the NC and UML are itching to get into govt, so they can also plunder ahead of elections. Money can’t buy you love, but it sure can buy you an election (at least in Nepal).

Speaking of moolah, after Awesome got one of his cornies to buy off a chunk of shares in a national media company for 42 corrodes, comes news that another oligarch is planning to put an arab or two into yet another media empire. At the rate these guys are going, the Mau Mau are not just going to be media tycoons, they’ll also be media typhoons. “Dollar appreciation” has new meaning in Nepal as the Baddies emulate the royalty they overthrew to stash their loot abroad. And with the NPR in freefall, looks like their ill-gotten arabs will soon become kharabs.

Two people dominated the news this week: Prachanda Pratap and Prachanda Putra. By their strident over-reaction to Kingji’s tv interview, the kongre, eh-maleys and baddies all showed their deep sense of insecurity. And by speaking out now, Kingji actually ended up cementing fraying ties between the fractious parties. If there is one thing that unites them it is their collective aversion to His Erstwhile Majesty. The meanest tirade came from PM BRB, who threatened to terminate the state’s facilities to the ex-king. First Lady Yummy spoke sense, tho. She said we deserve to have the monarchy back. Hear hear.

PKD Jr has long been the black sheep of the Awesome Family. But here in Nepal we are used to clown princes growing up into seriously spoilt brats. But Prakash broke the cardinal rule of Maoism: “Thou shalt not covet thy comrade’s wife.” It was OK that the twice-married ran off with a third girl-friend, so what if Bina is already married and with a child, what got PKD’s goat was that Bina’s husband is a Kiran Kaka loyalist. When hubby boy found out The Dear Leader was knoodling his wife in the vicinity of the Western Cwm, he blew a gasket and smacked Prakash in his nose, which is why you must have noticed The Dear Leader’s proboscis is slightly crooked. Fruit of Prachanda’s Loins is now absconding, and there have been several Prakash sightings which (like sightings of Elvis) have all been hoaxes. Rumours are that Prakash has emptied Daddy’s local bank accounts and headed south of the border. The party suspended the couple for being “cultural deviants”, and thankfully stopped short of accusing them of being “sexual deviants”.

What really got PKD’s goat was that the week BRB’s dotter graduated magna cum laude from TU, his son eloped. The PKD vs BRB spat just keeps getting worse. PKD sees the prez in the AM, and BRB goes to see the prez in the PM. BRB calls an all-party meet to talk budget, and no one shows up. PKD calls an all-party meet, everyone comes, and they all endorse the one-third budget. Just awesome.