The four main political forces finally decided on Wednesday that the proposal to revive the Constituent Assembly was dead in the water, and the least problematic option now would be to announce elections for spring. Although this has untangled one political knot, many others remain.

The party leaders are used to agreeing to things in a ‘package deal’, and that is going to be the first order of business: forging a consensus on the composition of an interim government that will oversee elections. Past experience shows that those negotiations can drag on for months. If a deal is not struck by Dasain, the Baburam Bhattarai government could stay till mid-November and even beyond.

There seems to be an agreement that elections will be for a smaller parliament this time that will also initially double up as a CA. The polls could also be combined with local elections to save money, and to kickstart development and improve accountability at the grassroots.

There are differing opinions on the legal complications about announcing fresh elections, mainly because the interim constitution doesn’t have provisions for another poll. But experts say the President could step in to remove obstacles following the doctrine of necessity, even though the stipulated ratification by a parliament within 30 days will not be possible.

Elections will also have administrative challenges: the Election Commission and other constitutional bodies are headless. Voting ID distribution hasn’t been completed, and there will be 2 million more voters above 18 since the last election in 2008.

But by far the greatest danger is that it will be an ethnic election in which campaigning will focus on identity. Negotiations on the draft constitution were stalled earlier this year precisely on the point of the character, shape, and number of federal provinces. In the Madhes, for example, the election could be a de facto referendum on ethnic-based federalism. Given the temptation and willingness of various political leaders to whip up identity politics, the campaign period as well as election day itself could see violence. Janajati and some Madhesi activists are already threatening an agitation to protest the decision not to revive the CA.

It goes without saying that the Election Commission should be independent and have the necessary clout to punish those flouting campaign guidelines. It should also be vigilant about preventing irregularities, voter intimidation, and booth capturing seen in 2008. The parties may also revert back to their old habit of wasting time and postponing elections to buy time, and the EC should be empowered to crack the whip.

Despite all the potential pitfalls, Nepal needs an election to get moving again. A fresh mandate could lift the logjam, but only if a smooth all-party understanding can ensure voting that is free, fair, and peaceful.
INTOLERANCE OF TOLERANCE

I n an unfortunate confluence of events, last week’s anti-American violence across the Muslim world over a purportedly ‘blasphemous’ YouTube video coincided with the death threat by extremists in Nepal against an artist for paintings deemed sacrilegious. It is not clear whether the rage that first swelt the streets of Benghazi, Cairo, Tunis, and Jakarta was not so much about ISIS to the Prophet in some obscure voice-over of an internet video soundtrack, but an organized campaign to exploit religious sensitivities for political ends. It is a clash of the civilised versus the uncivilised, between secularism and fundamentalism, between open society and tyranny, between freedom and control. In Kathmandu, last week activists of the World Hindu Federation (WFH) marched and threatened to kill artist Manish Harijan for works displayed in the exhibition, ‘Rise of the Colossus’, at the Siddhartha Art Gallery. But instead of protecting the artist’s constitutionally-guaranteed freedom of expression, the Kathmandu district administration summoned Manish Harijan and gallery owner, Sangita Thapa, and forced them to agree to remove the paintings. Instead of shielding the gallery, they sealed it.

War is the natural and sadistic playthings of members of the Hindu pantheon as super heroes. The artist’s main intention seems to be to lampoon globalisation and its intersection with institutionalised religion. At most, there is nothing there that doesn’t already exist in the streets of Benghazi, Cairo, Tunis, and Jakarta was not so much about ISIS to the Prophet in some obscure voice-over of an internet video soundtrack, but an organized campaign to exploit religious sensitivities for political ends. It is a clash of the civilised versus the uncivilised, between secularism and fundamentalism, between open society and tyranny, between freedom and control. In Kathmandu, last week activists of the World Hindu Federation (WFH) marched and threatened to kill artist Manish Harijan for works displayed in the exhibition, ‘Rise of the Colossus’, at the Siddhartha Art Gallery. But instead of protecting the artist’s constitutionally-guaranteed freedom of expression, the Kathmandu district administration summoned Manish Harijan and gallery owner, Sangita Thapa, and forced them to agree to remove the paintings. Instead of shielding the gallery, they sealed it.

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The Ghunsa helicopter crash on 23 September 2006 devastated Nepal’s nature conservation movement by taking the lives of 24 people, among them six of Nepal’s pioneer conservationists. Six years on, the void is slowly being filled by community-based environmental groups who are protecting the legacy of putting local people at the centre of conservation activities.

Conservation and Sustainable Use of Wetlands in Nepal (CSUWN) is one such project, which since 2008, has integrated wetland management with improved local livelihoods. Protecting Nepal’s endangered water bodies is important not just to conserve groundwater for human use, but also to save wildlife and migratory birds.

“Unless people at the grassroots understand the importance of conserving the wetlands that they are dependent on, it is difficult to conserve them at all,” explains Top Khatri of CSUWN.

Water resources in Nepal are often seen in terms of their hydropower potential only, so marshes, swamps, floodplains and lakes, which form a vital part of Nepal’s aquatic ecosystem, often get left out of the conservation discourse. Although wetlands account for only five per cent of Nepal’s total surface area, they are integral for recharging aquifers and providing a habitat for wildlife, especially migratory birds.

Among the nine wetlands in Nepal designated as being of international importance, CSUWN manages Ghodaghodi Lake in Kailali (pic above) in the far west and Kosi Tappu Wildlife Reserve in Sunsari. Ghodaghodi is a key link between the Siwaliks and the Tarai, and a corridor connecting Bardia National Park with Sukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve and it is home to 226 bird species. Says CSUWN Ghodaghodi field manager Rajkumar Poudyal: “The aim is to sustain its biodiversity while developing tourism infrastructure and sustaining the livelihoods of local people.”

Ghodaghodi has an 11-member committee that takes ground-level decisions on conserving the lake. CSUWN will hand over the management to the committee next year. Women from the Tharu community around GLA are actively involved in producing traditional mats and baskets from munj, a grass that grows along the banks. “Now we are able to earn money selling munj-based products to visitors at Ghodaghodi Lake”, says Asmita Chowdhary of Sukhad village (see box). Many households are benefiting from this initiative.
Weaving empowerment

Anita Chowdhary and Asmita Chowdhary of Sukhad VDC of Kailali are no longer stay-at-home moms. Everyday they leave for work with the four wheel cart which is their make shift shop for selling manj-based products like baskets and mats. They sell up to six items a day to visitors at Ghodaghodi Lake. Tharu women like Anita and Asmita blend their indigenous weaving techniques with contemporary styles. Shyam Badan Shrestha of Nepal Knot Craft Centre has been training them in new techniques so their products are more marketable. Nepal Knot Craft Centre and Organic Village have set up a joint-venture to promote and sustain the local enterprise. Says Shyam Badan of Nepal Knot Craft “Women not just learn to infuse contemporary style in their products, but also get a market for their handicrafts”.

The Ghodaghodi and Kosi Area to hand over management to local communities. The Ghodaghodi and Kosi Area to hand over management to local communities. Conservation Nepal: “We are carrying on the vision that our environment gurus passed down to us by getting local people to help protect the wetlands so that they benefit, the country benefits, and so does the planet”.bew the purchase of every Yamaha bike.

Ghunsa six years ago. The group had just visited the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area to hand over management to local communities.

Says Hum Gurung of Bird Conservation Nepal: “We are carrying on the vision that our environmental gurus passed down to us by getting local people to help protect the wetlands so that they benefit, the country benefits, and so does the planet”.

Bajaj, and Nepal.

Making the exhilarating journey across India, September, 27 expedition vehicles have been drive organised by Mahindra Adventure will end on 22 September in Bagdogra, India. Since 11 September, 27 expedition vehicles have been making the exhilarating journey across India, Bhutan, and Nepal.

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Early birds get the prize

Nepal has one in every ten species of birds found in the world. But as hunting and pesticide use spread along migratory routes, and habitat destruction, especially of wetlands continues, many of these birds are endangered. Still, Nepal is one of the world’s most popular bird-watching countries, with Pulchoki, Chitwan, Kosi Tappu, and Sukla Phanta topping the list. Thousands of bird watchers from around the globe spend days walking the trails and trying to locate elusive birds. Until recently bird watching was limited to foreigners, however urban Nepalis are slowly warming up to the hobby as was evident by the surge of photographs that Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN) received during its first bird photography competition last month.

Thirty-one photographers submitted 108 photographs as part of the fourth International Vulture Awareness Day, and a panel of four judges chose the top 48 photos which were put on display at Nepal Academy of Fine Arts in Kathmandu at the beginning of September.

“Twenty years ago we would find birds foraging in our gardens or making nests under our roofs. But birds are getting increasingly rare in urban areas today”, explains Hum Gurung of BCN, “we organised the event because we want to encourage students, locals, and bird lovers to go out, walk through the countryside, and learn about various species found in our country”.

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Susheel Shrestha (1st Prize)

Captured this Snowcock at an altitude of 5180m in Gorakshep inside Sagarmatha National Park. I was descending from Kala Pathar when I saw the bird, and spend the next two hours nearby taking almost 80 shots before I was satisfied. The job of a wildlife photographer is unpredictable. I have spent weeks in Chitwan, Bardia, and Sukla Phanta and still have not been able to photograph a single tiger. I have also taken a few falls while trying to photograph animals at awkward angles, but I love it.

Sejan Gyawali (2nd Prize)

I had taken many photos of the Pied Kingfisher before, but I wanted to capture the male and female together in one shot because it’s very rare to see them together. It took me three hours to get the winning shot. I have been working as a trekking and bird watching guide for the past five years. Earlier, I didn’t have my own camera so although I did all the hard work spotting birds and animals, my guests got to capture the images. But now I have my own device and get to click whenever I want.

Yatra Thulung (3rd Prize)

I took this photo of an Oriental Pied Hornbill while I was travelling with friends in the forest in Dharan. I was extremely fortunate because I didn’t have to wait for hours. I started off working as a photographer in a Kathmandu daily and took up wildlife photography four years ago to support myself when I moved back to my hometown in Hansapos, Sunsari. Although the cost of equipment is quite high and there is not much money initially, we get to archive different animal species in the country and make people aware. The money comes with experience and years.

Change in the air, #583
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REAL SCHOOL OF NEPAL, cheer for your school at the grand finals of Real School of Nepal, 25 September, Boudhanath School, Kathmandu

Nepal's heritage talk, enjoy an interesting lecture by Axel Plathe, UNESCO representative to Nepal, on managing the country's natural and cultural heritage during a time of rapid change. Rs100 for members, Rs250 for non-members, tea or coffee included, 26 September, 6 pm, Shankar Hotel, Lazimpat

NADA auto show 2012, check out the latest cars and motorcycles in town and see if you can strike a deal. 8 to 12 September, 9 am to 6 pm, Bhrikuti Mandap, Kathmandu

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Bhaktapur Street Festival, celebrate the centuries-old cultural artistry of Bhaktapur, 22 September, Bhaktapur Durbar Square

Indra Jatra at Red Lakefly, celebrate one of the most cherished festivals in the Valley with traditional music, lakefly dances, homemade ali, and the best of Newari cuisine. Rs350 for children, Rs750 for adults, 29 September, Red Lakefly Restro and Bar, Dharbar Marg, 4257705

Social entrepreneurship bazar 2012, sample the products, services, and ideas of social entrepreneurs from across Nepal and enjoy culinary delights, and the arts and music from across Asia, 6 to 9 October, 9 am to 4 pm, Babarmahal. Revisited, 01-4482254, 984179453, changefusinonepal.org

Every donor is a hero, contribute to saving human lives at this nationwide blood donation campaign, 21 September, Kathmandu, Patan, Bhaktapur, Nepalgunj, Bharatpur, 9849151877

Battlefield, team up with your friends for the ultimate paintball game and vanquish rest of the pretenders for a Rs25,000 cash bounty. 21 to 22 September, 12pm onwards, Sarepa, Lalitpur, 984132902, 50113675

Photography workshop, Canon School of Imaging is offering amateurs an opportunity to enhance their skills and gain in-depth knowledge on the nuances of digital photography, Rs4500, 1 to 10 October, 8.15 to 7.15 pm, Mahi Bhawan, New Road, 2083205, 2013198, workshop@canon-nepal.com, register by 30 September

Sarangkot Fordays Restaurant, have a Sarangkot special breakfast while enjoying spectacular views of the Himalayas. Sarangkot, Pokhara, 691-69620, 9817136896

Dining

Baylanju, enjoy great food at an affordable price. Shrimp cocktails, grilled fish, and desserts are favourites among guests. Lakeside, Pokhara

No Name Restaurant, Frindy ambiance with palatable dishes, try its delicious momochas. Putaliskot

Food

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A week of incessant downpour and the drop in temperatures had us craving for warm, fulfilling food and what better than soup and stew to beat the chill. With gyakok on our minds, we landed in Boudha which boasts of all sorts of eateries that promise “authentic” Tibetan cuisine. But we had been told that if we wanted a MSG-free wholesome bowl of Tibetan hot pot, Shangri-La Kitchen (part of Hotel Tibet International) was the place to go. And what a treat it was.

Gyakok is a complex dish that the chef needs two hours to prepare, so calling (01-4468188) the restaurant ahead of time is highly recommended. As we waited for the highlight of our evening, we tried sokrul (Rs 280) and chicken chili with olive oil (Rs 250) as starters. Sokrul, shredded beef fried in tempura batter, was soft and tender but a little dry. A dash of lemon could have worked wonders. The chicken chili too was not quite up to the mark. The sauce in which the chicken was marinated had not completely soaked in, so the layers of flavour were missing and by the time our tongues journeyed into the centre of the chicken, it was quite bland.

Our second round of orders – mushroom fried with white and red sauce (Rs 350), sweet and sour pork (Rs 380), and a bowl of rice (Rs 150) – made a better impression. The mushroom was very well-done: the sauce had the right thickness, and the combination of white and red wines was exquisite and easy on the palate. The juicy cubes of pork (fat-in) lathered in thick, tangy honey and lemon sauce with diced pineapple, capscicum, and onion were ideal for sweeping up what remained of our rice.

Just as we were savouring the last drops of pork fat, our much-awaited fare arrived. The chicken broth was brought to us in a copper pot with a chimney-like opening on top, and a burner at the bottom through which a constant flame brought the soup to a boil. We had a large selection of ingredients to dunk into the soup: cellophane noodles, tofu, bok choy, chopped cauliflower, potato, carrots, beans, black mushrooms, prawns, fish balls, and boiled eggs. Cooked and consumed over a long time, the gyakok is meant for four people (or five if your friends have a small appetite) as it comes down to a thousand bucks per person, and on a regular night, an order of gyakok should fill even the emptiest tummies.

Shangri-La Kitchen is an oasis in the otherwise cacophonous Boudha and my only complaint is its slow service. Other than that, the servers are extremely friendly, and the head chef Laxman Bhandari will even sit down to have a chat.

Trisha Rana
Happenings

Michael Clayton

Perhaps the best film of 2007, and also sadly one you may have missed, Michael Clayton is a stunning gem of a film, electrifying in its story arc, with restrained but gorgeous cinematography by the immensely talented Robert Elswit, and producing a slew of greats including the late Anthony Minghella, Sydney Pollack (who also stars), Steven Soderbergh, and lastly George Clooney himself who also plays the lead role of Michael Clayton.

George Clooney, the mega Hollywood star acts in the distinctly unglamorous role of a qualified lawyer who has, due to his own moral laxness, been denoted to being the 'fixer' or 'janitor' of the prestigious New York law firm of Kenner, Bach and Ledeen which has been the leading law firm on a class action suit against U-North, an agricultural giant that is caused by monkey bites. But human rabies is a fatal illness. Unfortunately, about 75 per cent of human rabies cases in the world (about 55,000 annually) is found in South Asia. Rabies is caused by a virus and transmitted in the saliva by the bite of rabid animals. In the US bats are one of the most commonly infected animals that transmit rabies to humans. In India, or nicked by a rabid dog.

This may turn out to be fatal because after a usual incubation period of about a week to two months, the child may come down with rhabdomyolysis and will have to be re-evaluated because they are too clever to be bitten by dogs, there is almost no documentation of rabies being caused by monkey bites. But clearly no one wants to be the first on this list. So the precautions prescribed below may be useful.

Children are particularly vulnerable to rabies because they may not tell their parents after they have been bitten or nicked by a rabid dog. This may turn out to be fatal because after a usual incubation period of about a week to two months, the child may come down with rhabdomyolysis and will have to be re-evaluated because they are too clever to be bitten by dogs.

Many people in Swayambhunath and Pashupatinath are bitten or nicked by a rabid dog. Around Teku, supply is erratic and especially if the bite is severe, then immunoglobulin (a kind of pre-emptive response' medicine, different from the vaccine) needs to be administered. Although immunoglobulin is available around Teku hospital area in Kathmandu. In case of a bite, regardless of prior (pre-exposure) vaccination, the wound needs to be properly cleaned daily with liquid iodine or soap and water as the virus hangs around the site of bite for a long time.

A 'top off' shot or two to boost the immunity will be required even if prior vacations have been taken. If prior vaccinations have not been taken and especially if the bite is severe, then immunoglobulin (a kind of pre-emptive response' medicine, different from the vaccine) needs to be administered. Although immunoglobulin is available around Teku hospital area in Kathmandu. In case of a bite, regardless of prior (pre-exposure) vaccination, the wound needs to be properly cleaned daily with liquid iodine or soap and water as the virus hangs around the site of bite for a long time.

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Zero sum game

The recourse to new elections is the result of mutual distrust among the parties, rather than the need to seek a new mandate.

Although the parties have been notorious for backing out of agreements, the decision to go for elections has ‘resolved’ the deadlock for now. The ghost of the Constituent Assembly can rest for the time being, but nobody can say for certain that the elections will take place in April.

The opposition NC and UML were not in favour of reviving the CA because they did not have numerical strength in the dissolved house, but neither were they super keen on new elections for fear they may lose. But now, the vertical split in the Maoist party and the multiple splintering in the Madhesi camp has suddenly boosted the NC and UML’s interest in new elections.

The Maoists and Madhesi parties wanted to revive the CA because that is their comfort zone. They tried their best to avoid going to polls because they realise they would not command popular support anymore and may not retain the same political strength in the polls. The fear of intervention by the President and unrelenting opposition may have forced them to agree on elections, but members of the ruling coalition have a ‘plan B’ up their sleeve and will bargain hard to retain leadership in the electoral government, unless there is a broader agreement on federalism and other sticking points in the constitution drafting.

The serial corruption scandals and vertical splits may have significantly weakened the Maoists, but it will be a mistake to believe the NC and UML have become stronger. Assuming that the Baidya and Matrika-led factions of CPN-Maoist contest polls (they maintain they won’t), the Maoist votes will be divided. But the two old parties have clearly failed to appease the sentiments of the Janajatis, Dalits, Muslims, Tharus, and Madhesis, who together constitute more than 70 per cent of the population. There are also reasons to believe that many Janajatis and Madhesi leaders in the NC and UML may leave the party in the event of an election. In short, the net effect will not favour them.

Nonetheless, in a democracy when politics is deadlocked, going for a fresh mandate is the best option. Because of the extent to which public opinion on federalism has been polarised, however, there is a real danger that the election campaign will be fuelled by ethnic sentiments and may turn violent. In Madhes, for instance, the election is sure to be a referendum on the Madhesi Pradash. The realignment taking place in the Madhesi camp (with unity talks between Upendra Yadav and Mahant Thakur) is an indication that federalism and Madhes may once again decide the fate of elections, like they did back in 2008.

On the surface, the Maoists, Madhesis, and Janajatis may seem natural allies due to their common agendas on identity and federalism, but the personal ambitions of leaders and overlapping political constituencies will make electoral alliances unlikely. For the same reason, the NC and UML are unlikely to forge a partnership. Eventually there will be fierce competition come elections, and the country’s weak law and order mechanism will be hard pressed to ensure free, fair, and peaceful polls. Even if the elections are peaceful, chances are, nobody will get a clear majority which makes a coalition government inevitable. The Madhes-based parties and fringe left parties will once again play a decisive role in forming the government, as well as voting inside the CA. If it will be old wine in a new carafe. The new CA under old leadership will not be any different. Once again, bargaining for portfolios will delay government formation and the issue of constitution drafting will go into the back-burner once more. We have seen in the past how parties which do not have numerical strength in the assembly have obstructed its regular proceedings and forced the other side into backdoor political negotiations.

The intention is not to question the rationality of the decision to go for polls, but it is better not to expect any dramatic breakthrough. The recourse to new CA elections is inspired by mutual distrust among the parties, rather than the need to seek a new mandate. If the parties want to gamble with 30 million lives by going for polls in a country where nobody is in charge and nobody seems to give a damn, they better give us good reasons to believe the new assembly will not become a proxy to the decisions taken by the three male party chieftains. If that is the case, reviving the old assembly would have been a safer and much cheaper bet.
Even in the refugee camps for people from Bhutan elsewhere in eastern Nepal, this week’s Tij festival was a time of singing, dancing, feasting, and fasting. But 52-year-old Ranmaya Chamling has never felt as lonely as she did during this year’s festival.

She and her husband Tek Bahadur are the only ones from their 20-member family still remaining in the Sanischare Camp in Jhapa. The others left for Toronto earlier this year under an international program to resettle refugees in the United States, Canada, UK, Norway, Netherlands, New Zealand, Denmark, and Australia.

However, Canada and the UK recently announced they would not be taking any more refugees, and this has worried families like the Chamlings who fear they will be resettled elsewhere and be separated from their children.

“This Tij was unbearable”, Ranmaya said, “first of all because the family is now far away, and also because we are afraid we may not be able to live close to them when we are resettled”.

Ranmaya and Tek have filled out forms for resettlement in Canada, but the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Migration Organisation (IMO) that are administering the resettlement say, there is no guarantee that the families will be together. Teams from Canada and the UK are visiting the camps next month to assess the remaining applicants, but UNHCR says it can’t be sure whether the humanitarian need to keep families united will be heeded.

For Ranmaya this uncertainty is agonising. She says: “It is even worse than when we risked our lives to flee from Bhutan 20 years ago”.

After being separated from their homeland 20 years ago, many Bhutanese refugees resettled in the West are now separated from their families.
against its Nepali-speaking citizens. That population has now grown to 120,000 with a whole new generation of refugee children born in the camps in Jhapa and Morang. After years of fruitless talks between Nepal and Bhutan about repatriating the refugees, in 2008 the international community decided to start third-country resettlement. So far, 71,000 refugees have left, nearly 90 per cent of them for the United States. Of the 35,000 who are still waiting for resettlement, some may not be sent to the same country their families have gone to. As the refugee numbers shrink, the seven camps have been collapsed into four.

Phulmaya and Lal Bahadur Magar are also alone in their bamboo hut, after two of their sons and grandchildren left for Quebec last year. Two more sons of the couple are still left in Jhapa, but now don’t know whether they can also go to Canada or not. Says Phulmaya: “We can’t wait for the whole family to be reunited again, but I wonder if UNHCR will understand our plight.”

The resettlement process is long and bureaucratic, and starts with the families first filling forms. Then the host country looks at the applicants and decides whether or not to take them, after which there are health checkups and orientation classes about the countries the refugees are being sent to. They are then taken in buses to Bhadrapur airport to fly to Kathmandu for their onward journeys.

Many of the refugees have for the first time in their lives found the dignity of citizenship after first being thrown out of their homeland and living in stateless limbo in refugee camps for two decades. The younger children are doing well in their new host countries, but there are reports that elderly refugees are having a difficult time adjusting. Older refugees generally tend to do better if they are close to their children and grandchildren.

Ranmaya was 32 when she and her husband were driven out of Bhutan with their small children. They still hope they will one day see their motherland, but for the time being all they want is to be reunited with their children in Canada. Ranmaya and Tek Bahadur sit inside their low-ceilinged bamboo hut gazing silently at the monsoon raindrops falling on puddles outside. Says Tek Bahadur: “We were first torn away from our homeland, and now our families are torn apart.”

No refuge when refugees leave, #568
Those who want to stay, #568
Gross National Shame, #551

No refuge when refugees leave, #568
Those who want to stay, #568
Gross National Shame, #551
A difficult dream

Each year thousands of Nepalis migrate to Japan and South Korea in search of employment, and the number of former officials joining private banks and financial institutions is increasing at an alarming rate. The list consists of former governors, executive directors, and directors. Former governors include Ugyan Kuma Thapa, who works as research and translator in a Japanese media company; “A Japanese academic notes in her research how Gorkhalis were known around the world for fighting enemies with their kukuris. Today they use the same kukuri to chop meat and vegetables in restaurants.” There are over a thousand Nepali restaurants in Japan which employ more than 6,000 Nepalis. Ram Khati, who has worked in five-star hotels in Kathmandu, is currently a cook in Saim restaurant in downtown Tokyo. “Our employers don’t tell us what our job responsibilities are and demand, a person has to cook, clean, and serve guests at the same time. Sometimes I have even cooked for hundreds of people on my own,” he says. Khan also revealed that migrant workers are often mistreated by owners and made to work without any food or salary. Things are no better for those who work in South Korea under the government’s EPS program. “The government led to us. We were told we would have to work 40-45 hours a week, and provided with training, clothes, and food. But we are made to work 70-75 hours a week with only two days off in a month and so far the Korean state has provided us no services,” complained a woman who works as a farm help in Korea. “Many Nepali men and women marry Koreans to gain entry into the country, and are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse,” adds researcher Manju Thapa about the deplorable conditions of Nepali immigrants.

Electoral passage

The number of former officials of Nepal Rastra Bank, the central bank of Nepal, who are joining private banks and financial institutions is increasing at an alarming rate. The list consists of former governors, executive directors, and directors. Former governors include Ugyan Kuma Thapa, who works as research and translator in a Japanese media company; “A Japanese academic notes in her research how Gorkhalis were known around the world for fighting enemies with their kukuris. Today they use the same kukuri to chop meat and vegetables in restaurants.” There are over a thousand Nepali restaurants in Japan which employ more than 6,000 Nepalis. Ram Khati, who has worked in five-star hotels in Kathmandu, is currently a cook in Saim restaurant in downtown Tokyo. “Our employers don’t tell us what our job responsibilities are and demand, a person has to cook, clean, and serve guests at the same time. Sometimes I have even cooked for hundreds of people on my own,” he says. Khan also revealed that migrant workers are often mistreated by owners and made to work without any food or salary. Things are no better for those who work in South Korea under the government’s EPS program. “The government led to us. We were told we would have to work 40-45 hours a week, and provided with training, clothes, and food. But we are made to work 70-75 hours a week with only two days off in a month and so far the Korean state has provided us no services,” complained a woman who works as a farm help in Korea. “Many Nepali men and women marry Koreans to gain entry into the country, and are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse,” adds researcher Manju Thapa about the deplorable conditions of Nepali immigrants.

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Those who grew up in Kathmandu Valley in the 80s and 90s have fond memories of the green and white trolley bus as it snaked through the capital’s major thoroughfares. Starting from Tripureswor and ending at Surya Binayak, the Chinese-gifted buses served the residents of the Valley silently and smokelessly for more than three decades for 15 paisa per ride, later increased to Rs 5.

But like all other public services run by the state, the trolley bus service fell victim to political interference, neglect, and corruption. Instead of extending the routes, even the one route collapsed. By 2009, the trolley buses had ground to a halt and its Min Bhavan terminal with 32 rusting buses was turned into a dorm for the Maoist YCL.

The trolley bus service, the Kathmandu-Hetauda cargo ropeway, Nepal Airlines, fire hydrants, post boxes, and other public services now live only in the public memory.

When Juddha Shamsher Rana established the fire brigade in 1938, hydrants were installed at critical junctions in Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur. Most of these Juddha, Bhim, and Bir ‘dhara’ were knocked down during the road expansion drive, and the few that still stand do not have any connections to the mains.

Today whenever there is a fire, fire engines have to first make a trip to fetch water. “When there is a fire in Makhan, we have to spend 45 minutes travelling to Mahankal by which time houses have been reduced to ashes,” says fire truck driver, Rajendra Bahadur Shrestha.

It’s not just the fire hydrants, the three fire brigades in the Valley have fallen into disrepair as well. In a valley with 3.5 million population there are only four functioning fire engines. These fire trucks not only serve Kathmandu residents, but also travel as far as Kavre and Dhading.

A study done by Juddha fire brigade estimates that the Valley needs one central fire station with 10 branches, 16 fire engines, and only four functioning fire engines. These fire trucks not only serve Kathmandu residents, but also travel as far as Kavre and Dhading.

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Another public service to fall by the wayside, as it were, are post boxes. Fifteen years ago the bright red unique temple-shaped boxes in New Road, Ram Shah Path, Dilli Bazar or Pashupati Sank would be teeming with personal letters and official documents. Today, except for letters from the Agricultural Development Bank and Land Revenue Office, no one uses them says Bandhu Bastola, a senior official at the General Post Office.

Administrative documents, legal notices, bank statements, and newspapers are still mailed via post. Private houses, apartments, and commercial complexes all have mail boxes at their main entrance, but the post boxes are gone.

Established in 1878, Nepal’s postal service which covers more than 3,800 VDCs with 3,991 offices and 20,000 employees is still capable of reaching Nepalis living in far corners of the country. However, the progress made in the past 134 years has been wiped away by state neglect.

The century old Hetauda-Kathmandu cargo ropeway which has been out of order for 13 years also lies in ruins. In its glory days, the 42km ropeway could make the journey from Kathmandu to Hetauda in four hours. The US-funded service used to run 10 hours and transport 220 tons of goods every day, provide employment to 600 Nepalis and was a vital fall-back when landslides and floods destroyed the highway in 1995. A year ago, the government was in the process of reviving the ropeway and two private companies in Hetauda had even shown interest, but the plan was aborted mid-way.

In the past few years trees, public toilets, water fountains, parks, and traditional rest houses have also slowly faded from the landscape of Kathmandu’s memory. Instead, the city resembles the aftermath of an earthquake with the half-finished road expansion drive.
10 cunning ways to cut load-shedding

For all of you who were thinking of temporarily emigrating to New Zealand this winter to escape the daily 20-hour blackouts, let me sound the all clear. No need to press the panic button, folks, get on with whatever you were doing. The reason is that our PM prime minister has met the energy czars and come up with a cunning plan which is top secret and is only published here if you promise not to tell anyone. It is a 10-point strategy that will eliminate load-shedding completely for the unforeseeable future:

1. The prime minister will get the fratricidal organisations belonging to his kranti-curry party to go on indefinite nationwide strike and bring all the country’s industries to a grinding halt after Dasain. This will cut peak hour transmission lines that are responsible for one third of the power loss in this country. (This, for once, is a deadly serious suggestion.)

2. Nepal’s population will be reduced after Dasain. This will cut peak hour transmission lines that are responsible for one third of the power loss in this country. (This, for once, is a deadly serious suggestion.)

3. Nepal’s population will be reduced by 3 million in the coming fiscal year by giving people free passports and paying for one-way tickets to the Gulf. (This, for once, is a deadly serious suggestion.)

4. Cable and satellite channels will be decommissioned nuclear power plants.

5. There are 5,000 treadmills in Nepal, installing dynamos in them will turn gyms into generators and add another 10 megawatts to the grid.

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7. Use hot air emitted during meetings engines as powerplants to generate 20 megawatts.

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9. PM looked UMMN into thinking he had 35,000 gorillas. Six years later, there are only 1,400 who have passed their class exams to get into the army. We don’t yet know how many will flunk their physicals. Anyway, whole timers who were deemed not to be real fighters trooped into the National Human Rights Commission the other day to complain that their fundamental human rights had been violated by categorising them as ‘unqualified’ and they demanded compensation. Let me get this straight: people who pulverised the shin bones of top leaders to generate steam to transport lines that are responsible for one third of the power loss in this country when they can rake in deals like that?

10. If BRB is so squeaky clean as everyone is led to believe then how come his protégés Bal Krishna Dhungel and Sujit BK who have been accused of murder are still walking free, and are going to be pardoned by none other than the attorney general (himself a prime ministerial appointee)? The truncated TRC hasn’t even been passed and pardons for war crimes are already coming in thick and fast. Then there is the mysterious case of Shri Jha. Remember him? He is the chap who was caught in flagrante bringing the family in Birgunj who was bumped off by Bhattarai’s sidekick, Sri Prabhu Sah. Anyway, guess what, Jha is promoted to head the juicy property mapping office, this time probably not to give bribes but to take them.

SUGR

In other news: when he was prime minister, Awesum got his Miscommunication Minister Maharaj-Jadhav to award crony communist Sue-Margie a lucrative telecom licence for next to nothing. And now he has sold off his shares to a Cyprus-registered holding company for a cool 70 million. (This, for once, is a deadly serious suggestion.)

Finally, it’s unofficially official: the dead CA will not resurrect itself. For BRB this is a victory over PKD who wanted to revive the CA, and he expects haggling over interim govt to drag on beyond Dasain. The netas had already slipped into election gear with Upadro Karned secretly dating Thakuri for several months now. The TMLP boss is thrilled with the idea, not just because he would get the big chunk of the Yadav vote, but also because he has finally found a way to shut the Guutch up. He knows Upadro is hoping to clean up his image, but politics is all about you-scratch-my-backside-I-scratch-yours. Never underestimate the crafty Guutch, who after he got whiff of Thakurji and Upadro playing footsie, called up kinsman Lux-man and firmed up the Tharu vote. The Humly Minister also got back at BRB this year for sabotaging his candidate for top cop by leaking to the press that the PM’s candidate is actually a war criminal.

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