The top secret new ‘formula’ to set up an election government led by the Chief Justice that the Maoists formally proposed on Thursday at their General Convention in Hetauda is not likely to find takers.

Constitutional lawyers and opposition parties flatly rejected it saying it was the latest move by the former revolutionaries to undermine the independent judiciary. Others said it was a red herring to allow the Maoist-Madhesi coalition to buy time and postpone elections. The proposal is expected to be bitterly attacked at a big rally that opposition parties are organising in Kathmandu on Friday.

“It is unconstitutional, it is against the separation of powers in a democracy, and it won’t resolve the deadlock,” political scientist Krishna Khanal told Nepali Times.

Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal told reporters in Hetauda that there was a ‘conducive atmosphere’ for the appointment of the Chief Justice to head an election government.

Opposition figures and lawyers say the Maoist proposal could also be a ploy to let the deadline for holding election by May-end lapse so the coalition can stay on in power.

Sunir Pandey

YEARN ZERO
The current government has dismantled all the constitutional checks and balances of Nepal’s democracy one by one

Editorial page 2
A year-and-half ago when Baburam Bhattarai came to power on the back of a four-point deal reached with his Madhesi coalition partners, we cautiously welcomed the move. We had doubts that an alliance made up of unlikely partners, we were warned, would end in instability. The prime minister started well with populist, yet popular, decisions. Bhattarai was tainted by his proximity to crooks, yet we gave him the benefit of doubt because the alternatives were so unsurprising.

Nearly two years into his administration, we admit we were seriously over-estimated the PhD-prime minister’s managerial skills, his personal integrity, and commitment to democracy and justice. Baburam Bhattarai has presided over the blatant plunder of the state by his cronies, tripped the opposition, run circles around the president, hoovered the international community to prolong his rule by systematically dismantling democratic institutions.

Historically around the world, Maoist rebels from the Shining Path to the Khmer Rouge have taken to violence to gain control. But should we take their counties back to ‘Year Zero’ through violent and armed struggle. After their convention this week, Nepal’s Maoists have declared that retaining and containing power is much easier by the ballot if they can co-opt constitutional justice. Baburam Bhattarai has presided over the blatant violation of human rights, of course.

The double-speaking Maoists have now weakened all the three main pillars of democracy. They dissolved the House of Representatives on 27 May last year, and then tried to pile the blame on the opposition. They consolidated their hold on the executive, manipulating the fear of the blame on the opposition. They consolidated their hold on the executive, manipulating the fear of the blame on the opposition.

The constitutional checks and balances of Nepal’s democracy are being systematically dismantled and disassembled for war crimes among the security agencies to command their loyalty. They let the judiciary dangle by allowing the 25-member Supreme Court shirk to six justices. Now, Bhattarai has proposed appointing Chief Justice Khilraj Regmi as prime minister to head a technocratic government to supervise elections. There are precedents in the region for chief justices to lead election governments, but such a move here would further emasculate the Supreme Court. With its bold decisions, the latest in overturning the prime minister’s instructions to probe the investigation into the wartime murder of journalist Dekendra Thapa, the Supreme Court has been the defender of last resort of democracy, free press, and the rule of law. Turning the judiciary into the executive would remove this last standing pillar.

Bhattarai’s next target is the fourth estate. His party has tried to buy, intimidate, and infiltrate Nepal’s main media. He has exhibited his contempt for free speech and justice by openly intervening in the Dekendra case. He has shown his disregard for the electoral process by leaving the Election Commission headless and without members. In Chief Justice Khilraj Regmi, all the constitutional checks and balances of Nepal’s democracy have now been deliberately dismantled. Bhattarai is also hoping the talk of elections will take the focus away from the war criminals he is protecting.

The tragedy in all this, of course, is that the opposition parties which are supposed to be defenders of democracy, free press, pluralism, and non-violence have not been able to take the moral high ground and launch a credible defence of those core values.

It was not clear to everyone, including the internationals, that the Maoist revolution was never about overpowering the oppressed, about inclusion or democracy. They say they are a ‘civilian party’, but have simultaneously announced plans to extend violence if they are not allowed to reach their goals. In Hetauda the party also unveiled a ‘production’ ideology pattern after the Maoists’ disastrous Great Leap Forward.

They have it all fouled up at absolute power.
Trilateral Track Two

Thinkers from China, India, and Nepal explore a new common agenda for prosperity for their 2.5 billion people

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setting aside the sophisticated discourse of international relations theories and all the ‘isms’ which we allow ourselves to be dictated and constrained by, one of the most compelling reasons to foster meaningful trilateral cooperation between China, India, and Nepal is to begin a process towards an ‘Asian values’ paradigm.

The term ‘Asian values’ has got a lot of bad press because of the perception that it undermines democracy and is against basic individual freedoms. It is often seen as an antithesis to ‘Western values’ of individual political freedom and pluralism.

But Nepal, together with the two Asian giants it borders to the north and south, all share a quest to generate more wealth and spread prosperity more equitably among their peoples. Maybe there is a new path and a re-definition of value systems that stem from the rich cultural and philosophical legacies of these three nations.

From Mumbai to Shanghai, from Lhasa to Lumbini, from Xi’an to Bhaktapur, from New Delhi to Kathmandu, the three countries subsume the medieval to the ancient, the past, present, and future. Can the blend of a rich cultural legacy and modern technological advancement bring about progress, both material and spiritual?

We have become accustomed to relying on a certain body of knowledge which prevents us from thinking outside the box, as it were. Our acculturation, education background, and upbringing may predispose us to accepting certain values as inalienable. But can we create a different constellation of beliefs that we could truly call an ‘Asian resurgence’ that combines the possibility of spectacular material well-being without sacrificing human dignity and freedoms?

Within all three of our countries we find common beliefs and practices that could be described as ‘medieval’, features which are apparently inconsistent with mainstream understanding of development, or incongruous with prevalent notions of democracy.

However they are not necessarily so and an earnest effort must be made to calibrate a new ideology for progress from the common cultural substrates in China, Nepal, and India. What contribution can and thinkers from the three countries make to this? With the advent of a unique trilateral meeting organised by the Nepal Institute of International and Strategic Studies (NIISS) to begin to discuss, starting from a clean slate, a common approach to development and progress.

It was a modest step on a shoestring budget to see if there is a possibility for trans-boundary power trade agreements, security, fighting crimes across borders, and jointly addressing disaster management.

This trilateral partnership, which will meet next in Beijing, will not just be a talk-fest, but explore concrete ideas for cooperation in energy with the possibility for trans-boundary power trade agreements, security, fighting crimes across borders, and jointly addressing disaster management.

Bhaskar Koirala is the Director of the Nepal Institute of International and Strategic Studies.

www.niiss.org.np
“Money from remittances should be used to create jobs at home”

How important for Nepal are remittances from India?
See, it’s a simple correlation. Approximately 67 per cent of Nepal’s imports come from India, and since there is a big deficit in the country’s balance of trade with India, remittances are crucial to pay for the said imports. The shortfall is made up for by exchanging US dollars for Indian rupees. Nepal’s economy has large dependence on remittance.

But the shortage of INR has set off a black market for Indian currency, putting pressure on the fixed exchange rate with NPR. Yes, but the beauty of the fixed exchange rate is that the Nepali remitters in India do not have to worry about exchange rate fluctuation. The black market is due to a demand-supply mismatch which in turn is caused by the trade imbalance. Tampering with the exchange rate by devaluing the NPR would benefit the Nepali worker in India, but it would have an adverse effect on the economy as a whole with inflationary pressure right across all the sectors of the economy on a short to medium term perspective.

Nepali Times: Most official figures for remittances from Nepalis working abroad ignore Indian rupees sent from India. Do we have a ballpark figure on remittances from India?
PK Mohapatra: We feel that approximately 60 per cent is received through official banking channels, and our bank channelises around NPR 20 billion a year. SBI Nepal gets another NPR 45 billion approximately. In addition there are withdrawals made from ATMs in Nepal by family members in Nepal from account holders earning in India. The system doesn’t catch all of that.

What should the government do?
From a banker’s view, emphasis should be on financial literacy, that is people should be educated in saving for the long-term. This will help in investment which will lead to creation of new jobs. Secondly, the government should increase spending on infrastructure which will act as a catalyst for further growth and creation of jobs. The third important issue is skill upgradation. If the youth interested to migrate can even be taught simple skills, their capacity will increase resulting in increased remittance.

And lastly, the industrial environment in the country should be improved to encourage new investment and capacity addition which will encourage the youth to work in their own motherland. Nepal has the potential to bounce back with investments in hydropower, IT, and service sector.

How badly is the banking sector affected?
Banking is a cyclical business. In Nepal, there was a spurt of growth in a short time. The system had to cope with new technology, young managers with limited experience, and promoter businessmen with limited exposure to running banks. This resulted in a large number of banks competing with one another for a restricted business potential. The problem was compounded by the issue of corporate governance. However, as is everywhere, the system is learning from past experience and getting through the process of consolidation. As the regulator, Nepal Rastra Bank is also on a learning curve and is taking corrective action to protect depositors and making the system robust.

On balance, it looks like you are cautiously optimistic about Nepal’s future?
There is cause for optimism. Hydropower has tremendous potential, and with the Nepal Investment Board taking charge, a lot of hurdles are being removed. The country’s fortune is linked to the service sector which includes hospitality, information technology, health care etc. But the sector crying for immediate help is agriculture. Investment in agriculture and agro-based industries is critical to create jobs and arrest migration of labour and on the agriculture sector. A major part of the money sent home is spent on consumption since there isn’t much of a habit of long-term saving.

So the net contribution to the national economy is not so significant?
When remittances are mostly spent on consumption there is no commensurate capital formation. It is spent on buying consumer goods, which are mostly imported so the money goes right back out. Despite that the rate can’t be termed insignificant. The national strategy should however be to use the funds from remittances to create jobs so people won’t have to migrate.

But the migrant economy also has downsides?
Precisely. I have been travelling throughout Nepal and one can see the social impact on communities and families of the migrant population. There is additionally the adverse effect on the availability of labour and on the agriculture sector. A major part of the money sent home is spent on consumption since there isn’t much of a habit of saving for the long-term. The national strategy should however be to use the funds from remittances to create jobs so people won’t have to migrate.

So what is the government doing?
Min. Ratna Bajracharya: We need a strategy that can only come about with long-term investment in quality education. That can only come about with long-term investment in quality education. There is cause for optimism. Hydropower has tremendous potential, and with the Nepal Investment Board taking charge, a lot of hurdles are being removed. The country’s fortune is linked to the service sector which includes hospitality, information technology, health care etc. But the sector crying for immediate help is agriculture. Investment in agriculture and agro-based industries is critical to create jobs and arrest migration of labour and on the agriculture sector. A major part of the money sent home is spent on consumption since there isn’t much of a habit of long-term saving.

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Neglected by the state, the far-western region of Nepal and its people have languished in a corner for centuries. A visit to any one of the nine districts often leaves many wondering how a place endowed with great biodiversity and abundant natural resources fell so far behind in its economy.

The decade long civil war undeniably pushed the region’s development back decades. Thousands were displaced, bridges were burnt, cutting access to the markets, food supply networks were destroyed, and most development projects and infrastructure projects were destroyed, and most markets, food supply networks were destroyed, and most villages were destroyed, and most major banks have branches from Darchula in the north to Kailali in the south. Although national development projects and infrastructure projects were destroyed, and most major banks have branches from Darchula in the north to Kailali in the south.

Transboundary relations with India is much better than parts of Nepal. the private sector along with the locals are weaned off aid they won’t be motivated to take risks or start a business. The locals will also need some basic entrepreneurship training which is where grassroots NGOs can step in. And the state for its part should negotiate with India for proper health care still plagues the region’s development.

Tourism and far-western regions are showing hints of progress and their positive and inclusive coverage is exemplary. Lack of proper health care still plagues the people here, but service delivery by staff mostly trained in India is much better than in the western and central regions.

Tourism and far-western Nepal don’t usually belong in the same sentence, but there is definite potential here to promote the ‘Sundar Sundar Paschimanchal’ brand. The locals are motivated to take risks or start a business. The locals will also need some basic entrepreneurship training which is where grassroots NGOs can step in. And the state for its part should negotiate with India for proper health care still plagues the region’s development.

Thronges of Indian tourists from neighbouring towns flock to the three casinos in the region, go back before sunset, only to return the next day, leading to a gambling industry boom. Thousands more cross the border at Kanchanpur/Kailali on their way to Bardia. With good road networks, no water or electricity shortgages, and plenty of natural beauty on offer the districts can easily attract transit passengers to stay over for a day or two. Exclusive products like rice wine, banana wine, allo (a local fibre), and Tharu and Rana handicraft just need better branding to capture a wider international market.

If tourism takes off in the region it will help inject much needed cash into the local economy and lift living standards. However, if it happens in an unregulated and unplanned manner, then tourism could end up destroying remaining forests, polluting waterways and lead to exploitation and overcrowding somewhere else.

This balance is imperative. Who should lead the ‘Sundar Sundar Paschimanchal’ campaign? I believe the private sector along with the locals themselves should be at the forefront. But unless people are weaned off aid they won’t be motivated to take risks or start a business. The locals will also need some basic entrepreneurship training which is where grassroots NGOs can step in. And the state for its part should negotiate with India for proper border management to facilitate trade and economic activities in the region.

BIZ BRIEFS

Click away
Rabin Mahajan has become the third winner of Phone 5 in the ongoing Yamaha’s ‘Like my style’ campaign on Facebook. Yamaha is giving away smart phones and cash prize to the most liked pictures of the contestants with their Yamaha bikes posted on Facebook.

Saving our heritage
Gorkha temple in Thapathali has been inaugurated after the renovations by NMB Bank as a part of its social initiative. In a statement NMB Bank said it has been spreading awareness on preservation of cultural heritage.

Zooming speed
Vianet is offering free installation and free three months fibre internet with yearly subscription of high speed internet via Fibre to the home (FTTH) technology at the ongoing CAN InfoTech. It is also giving away a Galaxy Note II to one lucky winner.

Golden offer
AIT, authorised distributor of TVS automobiles in Nepal has launched ‘Sunaulo Offer Chut Pari, Suun Pari’ giving cash discounts on the purchase of TVS bikes and scooters. Customers will also stand a chance to win gold through lucky draw.

Easy internet
Sudusub is offering special discounts for internet connection through Fibre to the Home (FTTH) technology at the CAN Infotech. It also has double bandwidth offer that gives customer free bandwith equivalent to the bandwith package they purchase.

Celebrating love
Tranquility Spa is offering Valentine’s day Midas CAN Infotech-2013 began in Kathmandu from Wednesday. During the exhibition, working papers on e-democracy and freedom of expression in digital society will be presented, and new models of mobile phones, laptops, and tablets will also be showcased.

IT power
The fifth day Medals CAN Infotech-2013 began in Kathmandu from Wednesday. During the exhibition, working papers on e-democracy and freedom of expression in digital society will be presented, and new models of mobile phones, laptops, and tablets will also be showcased.

A far-west side story
Nepal’s backwater is slowly beginning to rebuild and rebrand itself.

ECONOMY STUPID
Puja Tandon
A two-hour drive from Pokhara is the small mountain village of Nagnagini, but its picturesque setting below the Annapurnas masks a severe shortage of water. Like most other remote parts of Nepal, women and young girls in this village of Tanahu district spend hours fetching water with gagri on their hips. Because of the lack of access to safe drinking water, easily preventable gastric infections are still major killers of children.

Nearly 85 per cent of Nepalis today have access to safe drinking water, and this has been a big improvement from the past. But only 18 per cent of state-run water supply systems are fully functional. With help from the Finland government, five years ago the government launched the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Project in Western Nepal (RWSSP-WN) to improve access to clean water.

Part of the solution is technical: installing solar panels to power pumps to lift water directly into villages across nine districts. But in Nepal technology alone is never the answer, so the project tries to work closely with district and village councils to manage and maintain the new systems.

To encourage a sense of ownership and responsibility, each household helped with construction and bore one per cent of the costs with the Nepali and Finnish governments providing the rest. However, lack of local elections have meant that VDCs are less accountable to the people.

In some places, the new water system has helped generate income and employs coordinators, engineers, health promoters, technicians, and maintenance workers, many of whom are from local communities. And with water taps now a short walk away, women have more free time which they use to augment their earnings through organic farming, beekeeping, and raising livestock.

RWSSP-WN has made inclusion of women and members of marginalised communities a high priority. Compared to other national-level programs the participation of large number of women in particular is encouraging. The project’s gender and inclusion mobiliser, Sangita Khadka, says changing deep-rooted patriarchal and institutional barriers is an ongoing struggle.

However, poor management and lack of transparency mean that communities have not benefited as much as they should and the long-term sustainability of the project is at risk. Administrators at the IBGs and VDCs show interest during the construction phase, but once the physical infrastructure is in place there is insufficient monitoring of water use and user groups are not provided with technical support. The mechanism to collect water tax from users does not work, maintenance is shoddy, and workers are not always paid on time.

“Construction was the easy part,” admits Amrit Rai, head of the project’s Pokhara office, “but the process afterwards of mobilising and supporting the locals is hard and they aren’t being met.”

In the village of Nabhungdevi where the pumps are powered by electricity instead of solar, two out of the four pumps are out of order and the remaining cannot meet local requirements. Over at Nagnagini, the water supply is sufficient but neither the pumps at the source nor the solar panels are fenced to protect them from pollution and stray cattle and the pipes too are not fully covered. The village is yet to elect a pump operator and so far no fees have been collected.

In Kathmandu, Finland’s ambassador to Nepal, Asko Luukkainen admitted the problems, saying that the lack of locally elected councils affected accountability across Nepal, and was impeding the progress of development projects like the ones in Tanahun.

Luukkainen added: “We have to make decisions based on meetings with government officials, but have no local point of contact. So those decisions are not very democratic and might not be what the communities actually want. This is why local election is so critical.”

www.rwsspwn.org.np
SPRING OF HOPE: A young woman from Nagnagini in Tanahun uses a tap nearby her house. Before the solar run water pumps were installed by RWSSP-WN, she would have to walk for hours to collect water everyday.

WATER WORKS
Lack of local elections makes local officials less accountable, jeopardising vital rural water supply

ANNA-KARIN ERNSTSON LAMPOU IN TANAHUN
In the monsoon of 1992 I was a volunteer at the Modern Annapurna High School in Siklis. I was young, enthusiastic, and eager to learn about life in rural Nepal. It was a time of much optimism in Nepal, village elections had just taken place and ACAP (Annapurna Conservation Area Project) was moving into its second phase. I was able to see first hand the work being done by a small team of committed conservationists, who were motivated to environmental preservation, while ensuring that conservation did not impact the local communities with whom they worked regularly.

The late Chandra Prasad Gurung headed ACAP then, an eco-tourism project that he himself had pioneered. The boy from Siklis had the charisma and vision to change conservation thinking not only in Nepal but on a global scale. ACAP teams motivated community activities and development of a ground-breaking environmental curriculum for schools.

Many hours were spent meeting, talking with and listening to local people, explaining the ACAP approach and how it differed from the then dominant National Park policy and approach to conservation. This was when conservation initiatives globally were based on the western perspective that the environment should be preserved whatever the cost, and that people were the problem.

Thankfully, voices from non-Western, indigenous communities emerged to challenge this view and a more holistic model of development emerged that integrated conservation and development needs. Nepal was at the forefront of this paradigm shift and made this view and a more holistic model of development emerged that integrated conservation thinking not only in Nepal but on a global scale.

ACAP’s literacy classes were.

Sara Parker is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Liverpool John Moores University whose PhD focused on action research, non-formal education and women’s participation and empowerment.
CRANE

EVENTS

HIMALISTAN, the Himal Southasian’s magazine relaunches itself in a new avatar as the first quarterly ‘bookazine’ of Southasia. 8 February, 8pm. Vaishnavi Kendra, Patan Dhoka

Podcasting and audio storytelling workshop, learn how to develop, produce, edit and deliver compelling and dynamic audio story and reach a wider audience through the internet. 8, 10, 13, 17 February, 6.30pm. The Arts Cafe, Bagmati

EVERYDAY EPIPHANIES, an exhibition of photographs on Nepal by Frederic Lecloux. 3 to 8 February, Imaaj Del, Naval. 9841036875

Theatre training, gain a comprehensive grounding in the performing arts. 1 February to 29 April, Sushita Art Gallery, Batsamahal

Pondering moments, an exhibition of paintings by artist Seema Acharya. 3 to 8 February, Imaaj Del, Naval. 9841036875

Ultimate Photography Workshop, attend this intense workshop to get a extensive knowledge on creative post production and flash use from maestros Shahnawaz Mohammad and Rajieb Mahajan; only four seats available. Rs 3,000, 14 to 16 February, 7 to 9.30am. The Image Park, New Road, Kathmandu. register by 15 February. 9841240341/9841497639

Nepal International Indigenous Film Festival, the seventh edition of the annual NIIFF will explore issues related to Nepal’s minorities. 25 to 28 February. Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babarmahal

PRANAMAYA YOGA, join Satl for a day of Asthanga Yoga and guided nature walk in the pristine forest of Shivapuri; then join Marlon Weger in Patan the next day for a session of partner yoga. Rs 3,500, 8.30am to 6pm, 9 February. Shivapuri Retreat; Rs 800, 1.30 to 3.30pm, 10 February. Muluki complex, Patan. 9851020320

Start-up weekend, pitch your ideas for new startups and stand to win prizes and sponsorships from established companies and entrepreneurs. 8 to 11 February, SAP-Falha, Babarmahal. Kathmandu, 6pm to midnight on Friday, 8.30am to 9pm on Sunday. kathmandu.startupweekend.org, kathmandu@startupweekend.org. 985/1048689

April, City Hall, Nepal Tourism Board, Exhibition Road. (01)4107777. nyas_festivals@yahoo.com, www.tamefestivals.com

Comic relief, get ready for some great stand-up comedy with JL, an up and coming group of talented comedians. 16 February, Meneny’s Eatery and Tapas Bar. (01)5538919

EARTHTIMES, 10am to 6pm, Sundays to 29 April, 7 to 10 February. Gokarna Forest Resort; Rs 3,500, 8.30am to 6pm, 9 February, Gokarna Forest Resort

Drake Chinese Restaurant, try the lai ma fu, chicken with fungus and spicy pork spare ribs. Boudha, Kathmandu

DRAGON CHINESE RESTAURANT, try the Kung Pao Pork if alone and the Mai Cao if with company. Lakeside, Pokhara

Chongqing Fast Food, gear up for some mouth watering Chinese dishes like Sour and Spicy Pork and Kung Pao Chicken. Thamel

Shangri-La Kitchen, try the majestic Guyao soup and a wide variety of cocktails. 8am to 10.30pm, Hotel Tibet International, Boudha

Chopstix, savoury Asian food cooked in true Chinese fashion sure to charm and impress. Begin your feast with the Dragon Chicken, it’s one-of-a-kind. Kumarapal. (01)5551118

New Dish, grab filling meals like pork momos, spring rolls, and chop suyus with excellent value for money. Kishwa Pakhan

Bar

Baba Club, an up and coming bar. 8 - 14 February 2013

Barbeque Brunch Bazaar, the delights of Lebanon, Indian, Japanese, and Nepali cuisine await you every Saturday, Rs 1,300 for adults, Rs 2,299 for children. 12 to 2.30pm. 9 February. Gokarna Forest Resort

Meaney’s Eatery and Tapas Bar

Yak Restaurant, serves authentic Chinese food, try the mala tofu, chicken with langus and spicy pork spare ribs. Boudha, Kathmandu

DINING

F

or those unfamiliar with the Chinese calendar, this week marks the traditional Lunar New Year, a time for fun, family, and feasting. 2013 is the Year of the Snake, replacing the Year of the Dragon in 2012.

According to traditional Chinese beliefs, each year in the calendar is assigned one of twelve animals, and it is thought that these may have an influence on one’s personality, character quirks, and fortune for the year ahead. For example, those born in 1965, 1977, 1989, and 2001 are said to be ‘snakes’. An additional element of fire, wood, water, earth or metal is also assigned depending on a two year cycle.

Astrologists have predicted that this year is particularly auspicious for ‘Water Snakes’. All the other serpents will have a smooth sailing in their businesses and personal relations. If you are not sure of your Chinese zodiac sign, enlightenment is only a mouse click away.

The Lunar New Year is one of the biggest celebrations in all of China, and around the world there is a significant community of ethnic Chinese, such as Southeast Asia or California in the United States. An estimated 700 million people in China alone will travel back home to their villages and towns to visit their ageing parents and relatives.

The Lunar New Year isn’t an officially recognised holiday here in Nepal, but ethnic Chinese residents still find time to celebrate. Professor Zhang Shubin, director of the Confucius Institute at Kathmandu University, recently threw a party on 26 January with traditional games, songs, and poetry recitals. Although you won’t be seeing the popular lion dances and firecrackers on the streets of Kathmandu, with more and more young Nepalis fascinated with Chinese culture and languages, the festivities are likely to catch on.

And for those of you who want to experience the real deal, a short trip to China at this time of year might not be a bad idea. You will get a taste of the culture and tradition minus the crowd, chaos, and pollution.

For restaurants and caterers serving Chinese food, the New Year is traditionally the busiest and most profitable time of the year. Many Chinese families take advantage of their extended leave from work to travel abroad and neighbouring Nepal has always been a popular destination.

The Chinese have given you the perfect excuse to party, so what are you waiting for? Gather your friends and family, head out to Tian Rui (see Page 8) or the nearest Chinese establishment this Sunday and ring in a Snaky New Year. Xin Nian Kuai Le!
1000 trees

With Kathmandu’s growing urban sprawl and recent roadscaping, trees are quite a rare sight in the Valley these days. An NGO called Children of a Green New Nepal is taking the lead in saving our leafy friends and reclaiming green spaces around the city. CONN invites young and old, locals and foreigners, NGO and government workers to take a pledge on Friday afternoon to plant 1,000 trees around the Kathmandu so that the Valley is less polluted, more healthy, and beautiful once again.

MUM’S GARDEN RESORT

The restaurant is spacious and private tables upstairs, perfect for family gatherings. The walls are also decorated in traditional red paper lanterns and posters displaying choice recommendations from the menu, which might make you even hungrier than before you stepped in.

It’s a good thing then that the service at Tian Rui is fast, polite, and efficient, with our food arriving in no time after we placed our orders. The waiters even helped me tuck in my napkin properly and were quick to spot an empty glass on the table, filling it up with free refills of piping hot jasmine tea, the perfect accompaniment to any Chinese meal.

The menu offers a range of starters, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian. We decided to try a bit of both, ordering the golden fried mushroom (Rs 189) and the chef’s special spicy fish (Rs 329). The mushrooms were immensely satisfying, fried in tempura batter but lighter and easier on the stomach than a meat dish. The fish was served with garlic and two different kinds of chilies for flavour, and fried whole. Crispy and crunchy, we gobbled it up, head and all.

Of course no Chinese meal is complete without plain white rice (Rs 80). Like in Nepal, the phrase ‘have you eaten?’ in Chinese literally translates to ‘have you eaten?’ in Chinese literally translates to ‘have you eaten?’ in Chinese literally translates to ‘have you eaten?’. The sweet and sour chicken (Rs 349) and the green vegetables with carrots and mushrooms (Rs 219) are delightful.

The fish was served with garlic and two different kinds of chilies for flavour, and fried whole.
Outwardly the film follows the very mundane plot line of two people meeting, getting to know each other, overcoming several obstacles in their path to happiness, and living happily ever after. However, even from the very outset our two very star-crossed lovers are so much more interesting than the average Ryan Reynolds, Rachel McAdams types.

Bradley Cooper plays Pat Solitano Jr, a school teacher turned mental asylum inmate who had previously thought his anger issues were run of the mill until he discovered his wife in the shower with her fellow history teacher. His reaction, involving extreme violence, lands him with a restraining order barring him from approaching his wife and said history teacher, as well as a mandatory period at the mental asylum.

When Pat’s mother Dolores (played by the hilarious Jacki Weaver) rescues him from the asylum, Pat Jr returns home reluctantly to be amusingly monitored by his parents. Robert DeNiro does an equally comedic turn as Pat Sr, a man who himself has anger issues and has been barred from ever entering a football arena after having inflicted grievous bodily harm upon several people at an Eagle’s game in his youth. Enter Tiffany Maxwell (played by the extremely talented Jennifer Lawrence) a recovering depressive and sex addict who went into a decline after the death of her long suffering but stoically loving husband.

As Pat Jr resists, Tiffany’s sharp tongue and prodigious intelligence captivate him, though Pat doggedly refuses to acknowledge that the growing friendship between them might become something more, were he only to accept that his wife will never take him back.

Of course the story goes through several twists and turns, as romantic comedies are wont to do. However, it is the sensitive, nuanced portrayal of both of these deeply flawed human beings as well as the drool, sometimes even farcical, trials and tribulations of the people around them that keep the viewer rapt.

Cooper, Lawrence, Weaver, and DeNiro have all been nominated for each of the Best Actor/Actress and Supporting Actor/Actress categories in February’s Academy Awards ceremony; no mean feat for the seemingly ‘light’ comedy. Don’t be fooled and put off by this categorisation though. While I am not willing to entirely slam this particular film, it’s huge turning point for Ida. She went to the US, completed her medical studies from Cornell University in 1899, and returned to establish the CMC which remains to serve the health care needs of many rich and poor patients in South Asia. The hospital today boasts of departments like microbiology (study of pathogens such as bacteria, viruses, fungi) that are second to none in India. As microbiology is one of the most neglected areas of medicine in the subcontinent, many doctors prescribe drugs empirically based on clinical history and examinations. However, this prescription is often inadequate because in certain situations knowing a suspected organism’s sensitivity or resistance to a particular drug can be vital, especially when one is dealing with ‘killer’ bugs like mycobacterium tuberculosis.

While hospitals like the well-appointed Hinduja in Mumbai also boast reliable microbiology laboratories, they charge exorbitant fees. New, modern Nepali hospitals with state of the art microbiology units are coming up, but it will take some time before they can replicate CMC’s level of excellence and success.

Competent, compassionate, complete care

For years, Christian Medical College (CMC) Hospital in Vellore used to be the definitive medical centre for Nepalis who could afford a trip to south India. And Nepali doctors would frequently refer complicated cases to their counterparts in CMC.

For example, if a patient at Patan Hospital (back then Shanta Bhawan Hospital) was diagnosed with lung cancer, she would travel to Vellore (if she had the financial resources) to confirm or in many cases refuse the verdict. Today there are many other hospitals in Nepal and India that vie for Nepali patients, but CMC still stands out as one of the best. Competent and compassionate staff, and affordability mean that most patients stay loyal.

CMC hospital was started in the early 1900s by Ida Scudder, a third-generation American missionary doctor. Initially, she had no interest in carrying on the family profession. However, during her visit to Patan Hospital (back then Shanta Bhawan Hospital), she saw the husbands of three pregnant patients refuse to show their wives to her father because he was a man. Tragically the three women died of obstructed labour (a major killer in Nepal even today) and birth complications that night. This incident proved to be a huge turning point for Ida. She went to the US, completed her medical studies from Cornell University in 1899, and returned to establish the CMC which continues to serve the health
The post-Prachanda path

The first post-conflict Maoist general convention has finally departed from the communist doctrine of armed struggle.

When Pushpa Kamal Dahal was addressing the 7th General Convention of his party in Hetauda this week, in the audience were international delegates from communist parties around the world.

By the time Dahal finished speaking, it was clear to them that the UCPN (Maoist) was finally letting go of the doctrine of violence. He was jettisoning justification of Stalin’s atrocities and the mass deaths that followed Mao’s Cultural Revolution.

“Revolution in the 21st century can neither emulate the Soviet model nor the Chinese one. We must find our own way as we move ahead,” he said. Unlike his earlier speeches, which disguised an incongruous adherence to obsolete ideologies, the Maoist Supremo went on to chart out a post-Prachanda path for his party.

His political document declares that Nepal is no more a semi-feudal and semi-colonised society, and that the objective conditions for an armed struggle do not exist any more. It states that the relevance of the ‘Prachanda Path’ as a guiding principle is over, adding that the party will now work to institutionalise achievements gained after ten years of war and 19 days of people’s movement by finalising and declaring a new constitution through the Constituent Assembly.

In an effort to gain international legitimacy, the governing Maoist party fast tracked rehabilitation and integration of its armed wing last year, following which the party was taken off the list of terrorist organisations by the United States. The latest change defines the evolution of the revolution and the party’s new civilian avatar.

The political document has no mention of class enemy, and unlike past documents does not decry Indian expansionism and US imperialism as the primary threat to Nepali nationalism. The concept of ‘revolutionary’ land reform has been replaced by a ‘scientific’ system, and the party has abandoned the earlier policy of confiscating private property and distributing it to the landless.

“Radicals will certainly be disappointed but social democrats who want a reformed Maoist party in peaceful competitive politics will welcome this change,” leftist intellectual Shyam Shrestha told me as we discussed the document.

To be sure, Dahal’s position paper fails to clarify the party’s position and commitment towards completing the peace process by establishing a Truth Commission and addressing war crimes. And there is still a long way to go before the party can truly behave like a non-violent democratic entity.

The leadership must reorient and discipline its cadre, especially in labour unions and youth wings, who are still gripped by a war era militant mindset and often resort to lumpenism. It must tolerate criticism and use democratic means to express dissent rather than threatening physical action against those who disagree with the party’s conduct.

However, by renouncing violence as a means of acquiring power, the UCPN(M) has taken a bold step, and clearly the right one. For the first time, the party formally condemned left-wing extremism and dogmatism of its former Vice-Chairman Mohan Baidya and acknowledged that anarchist behaviour of former leaders like Matrika Yadav hurt its image in the Madhes.

By reaffirming its pledge to the 12-point understanding and commitment to drafting the constitution in partnership with other parties through a Constituent Assembly, the Maoists have sent a message to sympathisers as well as the opposition that they are willing to negotiate long-term space in mainstream Nepali politics. To the dismay of agitating opposition in the streets, the spotlight was firmly on Hetauda and not on their sparsely-attended and rained-out gatherings in various parts of the country.

At a time when the political landscape looks as gloomy as the weather, this is a silver-lining for Nepali democracy, and one need not be a Maoist supporter to welcome it.
Kathmandu’s streets are what nightmares are made of. The roads are narrow, there are pot holes at every corner, microbuses stop anywhere they want, and reckless drivers try to overtake one another like they are in a race. Like the rest of us, Bal Krishnan Ghimire (pic, right) too navigates through this chaos every day from his home in Jawalakhel to his work and back. But afflicted with polio from an early age, Bal Krishnan cannot walk and has to make this journey on a wheelchair.

With no accessible footpaths, his wheelchair is forced to compete for legroom with hundreds of cars, two wheelers, and tempos on the main road. When he wants to visit a shop, he has to first get down from his wheelchair and crawl over the wooden threshold found at the entrances of most public buildings. If there was a “most-disability-unfriendly cities in the world” list, Nepal would be in the top 10.

Despite these challenges, the 48-year-old weaver and craftsman considers himself fortunate. “I can get out of my wheelchair by myself,” he states matter-of-factly, “I wonder how fellow Nepalis who are blind or have spinal injuries go about their day-to-day lives in this uncaring city.”

According to the 2011 census, more than 500,000 Nepalis (nearly two per cent of the population) have some form of disability and those with mobility disability like Bal Krishnan make up nearly two-fifths of the total. Lacking proper roads and sidewalks, Kathmandu Valley is one of the most difficult places to live in for those who are mobility-impaired.

However, under-reporting due to the shame attached to being disabled and the government’s narrow definitions, mean that the actual numbers are higher. Nepal became one of the first countries in the region to introduce a disability act in 1982 and is a signatory to the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Despite the numerous guarantees and significant aid, the state has little to show for its efforts.
Moving grounds

An entire two kilometre stretch from Jorpati chok to the gates of Khagendra New Life Centre (NLC) has been earmarked to undergo a major face-lift in the next 12 months. With wider, smooth walkways and guide-strips, the community-led project will make travelling much easier for the wheelchair bound and the visually impaired.

The road will be named after Khagendra Bahadur Basnyat who founded NLC. Started almost half a decade ago, New Life Centre is one of the pioneer organisations in Nepal to provide physiotherapy and counseling to disabled people.

The only relief for the physically-challenged comes from private organisations like the National Rehabilitation Society for the Disabled which distributes hundreds of free wheelchairs annually and the Nepal Disabled Association (NDA) which is giving Jorpati’s streets a disability-friendly makeover (see box). NDA also provides income-generating skills training so that Bal Krishnan and others like him can become financially independent.

“I left home at 24 because I was depressed. I started learning how to make incense sticks and candles and weave baskets through NDA’s support. Now I earn a reasonable income through NDA’s support. Now I earn a reasonable income and feel wanted by my family. I am independent,” explains Bal Krishnan.

While physically challenged residents of Kathmandu overcome hurdles day in and day out, the lack of disability-friendly facilities is also making Nepal an unpopular destination and keeping potential tourists at bay.

“We have been taught to think of people with disabilities as somehow lesser. They don’t deserve the same resources and treatment as able-bodied people,” says Navyo Eller, marketing head of Navyo Nepal, “even small changes like putting larger seats in buses can help, but we just don’t bother.”

Navyo Nepal is one of the few travel agencies which arranges tours for disabled tourists by providing vehicles with ample space and mobile toilets for trips outside the city.

Despite the challenges faced by the disabled community, there are causes for optimism. The rapid rise and accessibility of communications technology such as mobile phones and the Internet have been crucial in improving educational standards, as well as skill training. Disabled children no longer have to drop out of school due to lack of facilities, if they can learn and study online. But this requires a more involved government and a change in societal attitudes towards people with disabilities.

“For Bal Krishnan, any signs of change, but progress is still slow,” he says. “I am glad we didn’t wait for the government to come around and started this initiative on our own,” says an upbeat Danda Bahadur Budathoki, a wheelchair user who owns an electronics shop in Jorpati.

“I once saw a man on a wheelchair who was nearly run over on the road. I wondered why he didn’t use the sidewalk instead, until I saw that the sidewalk was uneven, full of pot holes, making it nearly impossible for him to navigate. As an able-bodied person I just did not realise how bad the situation was,” recalls Arun. “I want to use my expertise to make lives a little easier for fellow Nepalis in my own small way.”

With the government ready to cover 60 per cent of the construction cost, locals have begun door-to-door fundraising and organising charity events to meet the remaining expenses. If the committee can complete its fundraising goals, Jorpati will serve as a positive example that the worth of a society lies in how it treats its disadvantaged members.

“I am glad we didn’t wait for the government to come around and started this initiative on our own,” says an upbeat Danda Bahadur Budathoki, a wheelchair user who owns an electronics shop in Jorpati.

“Right now there are three steps leading up to my shop which makes it difficult for me to carry things inside. In a year, there will be ramps here which will let me move freely and I am sure my business will also pick up.”

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Differently-abled, #179

Educating children with disabilities, #568

Different, but able, #574

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Unwanted at home and abroad

Interview with Khagnath Adhikari, deputy chief of Nepal mission in Delhi, Mitra Lal Sharma chairman of International Nepali Unity Society and Loknath Bhandari, chairman of Non-Resident Nepalese Association (India), BBC Nepali Service, 26 January

What are some of the problems faced by Nepali immigrants in India?

Subash Devkota, from exercising. We are that we have been prevented

There are provisions for

LB: happened so far.

We have continuously told billions of rupees allocated

open bank accounts and thus

identity cards. They can't

in unions, don't even have

problems?

done to address these

Mitralal Sharma: immigrants in India?

What are some of the

Bhattarai, and Shrestha all want leaders from their respective

the formation of the 150-member central committee. Dahal,

the top post and Bhattarai and Shrestha will carry on in their

least until the end of the convention, Dahal cleared his path to

could continue on at

the current government

by dropping hints that

convention are on his

representatives at the

various factions out in the public once again.

It was clear that the

chairman was speaking

under some pressure

and mincing his words.

Even though more than

60 per cent of the

representatives at the

convention are on his

side, Dahal was clearly

trying to win Bhattarai's

support which is crucial

if he wants to be re-

lected as the chairman.

After placating the PM

dropping hints that

the current government

could continue on at

least until the end of the convention, Dahal cleared his path to

the top post and Bhattarai and Shrestha will carry on in their

posts as vice-chairmen.

The real power struggle,

however, will manifest itself over the formation of the 150-member central committee. Dahal, Bhattarai, and Shrestha all want leaders from their respective factions to form a major part of the committee.

The top three remain undecided over who among Post

Bahadur Bogati and Krishna Bahadur Mahara should be

appointed as general secretary. Both belong to Dahal's bloc, but it is clear that Bhattarai will support the former because Bogati is likely to remain neutral and Mahara is not. Narayan Kaji Shrestha suggested his loyalist Giriraj Mani Pokhrel, but

Bogati is likely to remain neutral and Mahara is not. Narayan

appointed as general secretary. Both belong to Dahal's bloc,

among the long list of

aspirants: Top Bahadur

would be accepted by the

party to decide

over a year ago, introduced a provision through which

Nepalis can easily send up to IRS 50,000 home once a

month. Also it was the Indian government who requested us to ban high denomination notes because it thinks the open border will be used to smuggle counterfeit notes into India.

You’re also demanding that non-residential Nepalis be allowed to vote during elections at home. Why?

MS: More than one-fourths of Nepal’s youth, who desperately want their country to develop, work abroad. They must be given a chance to practice their democratic right and make their voices heard no matter which corner of the globe they are in.

LB: Most countries in the world allow their citizens living abroad to vote through an absentee-ballot, it’s only our country which gives up before trying.

Identity card: Press

There are many more appointments that need the

consensus of the top three leaders. They

need to decide on the party’s secretary from

among the long list of aspirants. Top Bahadur Rayamajhi from the Bhattarai faction, Banna Mh Man Pun from Dahal’s faction, and Gita Man Pokhrel from Shrestha’s camp.

It might be difficult for the party to decide

on the number of secretaries, but given Dahal’s reputation he might take the easy route by elevating all three as party secretaries.

Instead of opting for elections, many leaders have sought to solve these issues through give and take bargaining in the closed sessions. The gathering was dubbed as ‘Unify General Convention’ and the Maoists have lived up to the billing by boycotting intra-party elections altogether.

Subash Devkota, himalnabar.com, 4 February

As Puusha Kamal Dahal, Babram Bhattarai, and Narayan Kaji Shrestha locked horns to appoint officials and central committee members of their choice, UCPN(M)’s convention in Hetauda this week brought the differences between the various factions out in the public once again.

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Hard Life: A Nepali rickshaw driver in Delhi.
DAMBAR KRISHNA SHRESTHA

Social research in Nepal is in sharp decline because of political interference and government apathy

It has been a decade since Agriculture Program Services Centre (APROSC) closed, but there has been no efforts to revive it or establish a similar research agency. In the last 20 years social research in Nepal has taken a back seat, making it difficult to understand Nepali society’s changing dynamics.

Although there are about 200 private research firms across the country, increasing political interference and lack of neutrality worries many. Professor Haridhwoj Pant of Tribhuvan University’s Centre for Economic Development and Administration (CEDA) says that research and investigation in Nepal are no longer as independent as they used to be. “People conduct research these days to use up donor money and to ‘prove’ the legitimacy of their policies and programs,” admits Pant, “there is no research for the sake of studying and understanding Nepali society and culture.”

Swedish researcher Tony Hagen was one of the first people to conduct scientific studies in the region. He was followed by local pioneers like Harka Gurung who opened up a wealth of knowledge about the country’s geography and demographics. His concept of regional development during his tenure at the National Planning Commission resulted in the formation of five development regions.

With the establishment of CEDA in the 1969 many research agencies followed like Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS), Research Centre for Applied Science and Technology (RECAST), Centre for Educational Innovation and Development (CERID) under the Tribhuvan University. However, political appointments in the TU has led to a sharp downfall of these centres. Many well-qualified research associates were either transferred, or moved abroad or started their own private firms in hopes of a better and more secure future. Cuts in state funds have only made things worse.

“The government’s apathy has stunted the growth of research culture in Nepal,” says Mahesh Baskota, dean of Kathmandu University’s school of arts says. Tribhuvan University saw many protests and closures in last August because of the differences of UCPN(M), UML, and Nepali Congress over appointment of the university’s dean. Research centres that were working without chairs until recently had all posts filled as per the power sharing agreement between major political parties. CEDA has Ram Chandras from UCPN(M), CNAS has Naniram Khatri from Congress, RECAST has Ram Prasad Chowdhary from Madheshi Morcha and Krishna Chandra Sharma from UML has been appointed as the executive director for CERID.

Professor Pant is sad to see the sorry state of social research in Nepal and says while parties are busy playing politics and dividing the funds, the loss of knowledge is hurting the entire society. “Since all appointments, plans, and projects have to be approved by politically affiliated groups, research has lost its integrity, but no one seems to care about the long-term damage,” concludes Pant.
Cheques and balance

The talk of the town in Hetauda (was it chosen because it rhymes with ‘Hatoda’?) this week was whether the Maoists had indeed turned from a caterpillar to a butterfly, or whether the talk of metamorphosis was to take attention away from war crimes to elections.

Comrade Fierceness, who once sowed terror in the hearts of millions during a revolution that bore his name, was like a mouse that roared. Unlike the last general convention in 1991, this time he excised all mention of ‘American imperialism’, and did not threaten to go to do battle with ‘Indian expansionists’. There was no mention of the ‘Tunnel War’ he declared on India in 2004 in which every school was asked to dig a trench to thwart an imminent Indian invasion. He said the Baddies were now Goodies, and firmly committed to a ‘capitalist democratic revolution’. This great proletarian party may have abandoned the revolution, but it had firmly retained its gift of the gab.

It was a careful balancing act to break the bad news to the cadre that it is no longer a cadre-based party. What a disappointment to erstwhile killers that you can’t go around anymore bumping off people you don’t like, you can only threaten to bump them off. There were quite a few verbal contortions like these to defend the new oxymoron of non-violent Maoism. He had to gently break it to cardholders that are now part of a ‘civilian party’, but they can still dismantle all the cheques and balances of democracy. The most difficult must have been to tell the YCLs that the party did not believe anymore in violence, intimidation, and extortion. But what took the cake was the proposal to resolve lingering border disputes with India with a referendum in Nepal. Whoa, here is how it is supposed to work: Nepalis will vote in a referendum and overwhelmingly demand that India be nicer to us. That should do the trick.

All this narrowly coincided with word from Indian social media that newly-anointed Crown Prince Rahul is a man who passionately believes in foreign affairs. The last time he was going steady with a Colombian woman, New Delhi’s aptly-named Ministry of External Affairs, which is entrusted with keeping track of the alien liaisons of political scions, vetoed it. Now, rumour has it, Rahul is secretly seeing a Nepali lass and keeping it under the radar for fear that the Babus will again pull the plug. But looking at it from Nepal, it’s great news. A future prime minister of India and a future prime minister of Nepal married to each other would open up a new era of Indo-Nepal Friendship and Cooperation. We won’t have to dig trenches anymore. There would never be a diesel shortage, and no load-shedding, too. Also, we wouldn’t have to revise the 1950 Treaty because it would be automatically replaced by a Prenup.

Since the prime minister’s official residence in Balu Water is just over the fence from the residence of the Chief Justice, BRB has apparently been summoning CJ Regmi to climb over the wall and come over for a chat. The mule’s mole at the PMO says the prime minister often probes the Chief Justice on what his reaction would be on various pending cases, including those to do with the president’s ultimatums and war crimes. It was during one of these tête-à-tête that BRB seems to have got a brainwave: why not let the CJ be the PM and stone two birds? To understand the prime minister’s current mindset, one just has to consider the remark he made when cornered in Hetauda on Monday for being an Indian stooge by cadre from the PKD camp: “If we hadn’t been in power, they’d have taken us to The Hague.”

Can’t quite make out when the prime minister is joking, and when he is being serious. When he called his Chairman a ‘neta of netas’ was he stroking the ego of a man he knew to be vain, or poking fun at him? And then in the closed door meeting, he compared Comrade Maximum Leader to ‘Hanuman’, the flying monkey god who set fire to Sri Lanka with his flaming tail.