Populism and polls

When UML MPs reached Parliament on Thursday to obstruct proceedings as they have for the past two weeks, they found out the House had already been adjourned until next week. A notice pasted at the entrance (right) read that it was because of ‘Special Reasons’.

No time for guessing what those special reasons are. It has now become a standard practice to postpone Parliament whenever there is no consensus on a debate. But there are signs the deadlock is finally ending. The Big Three parties are closer to a consensus to hold local elections. NC President Sher Bahadur Deuba on Thursday said: “We have a deal, and no one can stop us from holding all three elections in the next 14 months.”

But the UML is still wary of the election bill the government tabled in Parliament on Wednesday. UML secretary Pradip Gyawali told Nepali Times that Deuba misled the opposition by first saying polls would be based on existing constituencies. “Now he says elections will follow new structures,” he stated.

The extended deadline to propose new municipal and village councils in place of existing municipalities and VDCs expired on Thursday, but the Local Level Restructuring Commission is still struggling to rearrange local bodies in Province 2 due to obstruction by Madhesi parties. Saradha Party leader Rajendra Mahato has warned that any new elections will not be held as long as the constitution is not amended. “Old or new local structures, elections cannot take place without amending the constitution,” he told journalists.

The UML says elections should be the government’s priority rather than the amendment. “The minority should stop ruling the majority,” Gyawali said. “Otherwise the deadlock will continue.”

However, political scientist Krishna Pokharel warns that the Big Three should not repeat the mistakes they made while renegotiating the constitution: “Madhesi parties have hardened their stance after being left out, and if that happens again, they will obstruct elections just like how they are obstructing local body restructuring in the Tarai,” Om Astha Rai

HEADS WE LOSE, TAILS WE LOSE
EDITORIAL PAGE 2

THE BOUDHA KORA

It has only been a month since Boudhanath was reopened after its repair and consecration, and it is once again crowded with devotees and tourists circumambulating the shrine. The stupa is one of the holiest Buddhist sites in Nepal, and pilgrims and tourists are flocking to the many shops, cafes and even meditation centres that surround it. Nepali Times presents a comprehensive guide to places to eat and things to do in Boudha.
HEADS WE LOSE, TAILS WE LOSE

Separating hills and plains may lead to violence, keeping hills and plains together may also lead to violence.

I f we were to update readers in one sentence about the state of affairs in Kathmandu as 2016 draws to a close it would be with this: Debate in parliament about constitutional amendments on federalism is deadlocked because of elections, but elections themselves are necessary to prevent a deadlock on the constitution.

So, which comes first, the constitution or elections, has become a chicken or egg question. On one side of this debate is Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, his Maoist-Centre and Nepali Congress coalition comrades who want to register the second amendment bill in Parliament to unentangle the political knot. The opposition UML is sticking to its demand that the hill districts of Province 5 cannot under any circumstances be grafted into Province 4. To ram the point home, the UML has obstructed parliament, and spearheaded mammoth cross-party protests in Butwal and other towns of Central Nepal against chopping up Province 5.

The question in everyone’s mind is: if this is the kind of opposition and hill-plains friction that greets plans to change boundaries in Province 5, imagine the kind of possible bloodshed that will accompany any attempts to gerrymander with Itahpa, Morang and Sunsari in Province 2 and Kailali and Kanchanpur in Province 7. Nepal is in a hords we lose, tails we lose situation: separating hills and plains may lead to violence, and keeping hills and plains together may also lead to violence. Yet, there is no alternative to finding a compromise suitable to all. Prolonging this uncertainty will push Nepal further into instability and a constitutional void that elections are not held in 13 months.

Obstruction of parliament is already impacting on pending legislations, including bills dealing with the amendment on federalism is deadlocked and constitutional amendments on federalism is deadlocked through constitutional amendments. On one side of this debate is Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, his Maoist-Centre and Nepali Congress coalition comrades who want to register the second amendment bill in Parliament to unentangle the political knot. The opposition UML is sticking to its demand that the hill districts of Province 5 cannot under any circumstances be grafted into Province 4. To ram the point home, the UML has obstructed parliament, and spearheaded mammoth cross-party protests in Butwal and other towns of Central Nepal against chopping up Province 5.

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Obstruction of parliament is already impacting on pending legislations, including bills dealing with the implementation of the new constitution, or the impeachment process against CIIA chief Lokman Singh Karki. The dispute is now seriously impacting on the election timetable for local, provincial and federal polls. The expiration date of the current Parliament is 21 January 2018, and no one knows what will happen if the three elections are not completed by then. There is no precedent in Nepali history to deal with that kind of emergency. The biggest casualty of that vacuum will be the Constitution drafted by the Constituent Assembly.

Since it is electoral reckoning that has deadlocked negotiations on the constitution amendments, that is where efforts must be made to find a way out. The Madhesi parties are convinced that the boundaries of future federal provinces will determine their continued existence. The Nepal-UML Coalition hopes to use a Madhesi-friendly second amendment to bolster its support in coming elections and regain its once-dominant position in the Tarai. The Maoist-Centre, for its part, wants to use the amendment to reclaim the support of Janajatis whom it promised provinces based on ethnic identity.

The UML is playing the nationalist (road anti-Indian) card to the hilt by labelling the second amendment an Indian gane plan. The party is making itself out to be the only one that can safeguard the country’s sovereignty and independence. In this, the Maoist-UML plan to amputate Province 5 has become the UML’s most potent weapon for next year’s elections.

All political forces in Nepal are doing what parties usually do: ensure an electoral upper hand. The only problem is that populism and polls usually lead to disaster. The only way to ease the current volatility, confirm election dates, and steer the country away from a risky future is for the leaders of the biggest and second biggest parties (NC and the UML) to put their heads together. Sher Bahadur Deuba and K P Oli did so this week, but it was more of a chance meeting than anything else.

As we see it, a clear compromise is possible if the NC can use its national government after the constitution amendment is necessary for the proper implementation of the constitution. That such a trade-off can pave the way for three tiers of elections and give the country and its long-suffering people some much needed breathing space.
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Nepal-China trade goes

Daigou sellers turn to WeChat and Taobao to sell Nepali handicrafts in China

While souvenir shops in Kathmandu and Patan are worried that the number of Chinese tourists had dropped by half after last year’s earthquake, Nepali handicrafts have found a foothold in the Chinese market through an informal social network called Daigou. The network specialises in buying and selling exotic items unavailable or hard to find in China, usually through social media network WeChat or the e-commerce site Taobao.

Nepal, this grey market operates through a network of professional agents and individual buyers in Thamel who visit Nepal regularly to source popular items like Buddha statues, Thangkas, Bodhi Citra beads, wood carvings and silver...
online

Bead exports

With intense competition to sell Nepali cultural products in China, some Daigou agents have specialised in high-value items like sacred Bodhi Citta seeds which are used in Buddhist prayer beads. Also called two-eyed Bodhi beads, they are seeds of trees that grow in the wild and are found abundantly in Nepal’s midhills. In recent years they have become a source of good income for Nepali farmers.

Yundan Jiacuo is a professional Daigou agent who has been selling Bodhi Citta prayer beads on WeChat and sources his seeds from villages in Kavre district to the east of Kathmandu Valley, buying up to Rs 200,000 worth of the holy seeds on each trip. “Purchases at the place of origin is very important because the competitors may get there before me,” says Jiacuo, who has to establish long-term relationships with Kavre farmers to ensure he has stable supply. “Nepali business is hugely competitive and you have to invest a lot of effort.” Wu Beichun (picture above left), another Daigou online retailer has three e-commerce sites on Taobao, and says that prices have dropped from Rs 4,400 for a set to Rs 3,100 this year because of oversupply. He adds: “A major advantage of e-commerce is using sales to earn traffic, so the huge competition makes many people sacrifice profits to increase sales.”

Discount galore

Turkish Airlines has announced special fares to Europe and India for the low period up to 31 March 2017. Customers can avail this offer till 31 March 2017.

Aiming high

Premia Store, caught the first prize in the Golfing Golf 2016 that constituted last week. Premia Store, with participation of around 100 players from all over the country.

A good 2016

Qipao Airways which was currently operating flights to 23 destinations in Africa added Seychelles to its new growth.

Discount galore

Turkish Airlines has announced special fares to Europe and India for the low period up to 31 March 2017. Customers can avail this offer till 31 March 2017.
DEMAND FOR FLATS FLATTENS OUT

The earthquake not only shook Kathmandu’s tall apartment buildings, but also people’s confidence in them

RAMESHWAR BOHARA

Everyone is selling, but no one is buying, or investing. That just about summarizes the status of Nepal’s apartment industry.

Having suffered physical damage during last year’s earthquake, developers are struggling to assuage a wary public about the safety of their high-rises.

After the earthquake, not a single investor has sought permission to build new apartments in Kathmandu Valley. Those who had already obtained permits have postponed plans, others have cancelled projects. Those with damaged buildings have done patchwork repairs for their flats, but there are few takers.

“Builders have no confidence that they can sell apartments,” says an engineer at the Department of Urban Development and Building Construction (DUDBC), the government body that issues licenses for apartment construction.

The DUDBC had issued the first license to build an apartment in Kathmandu in 2004 and until last year’s earthquake, the DUDBC had issued licenses for 71 apartment buildings. But only 51 were actually constructed. As many as 20 apartment buildings suffered cracks, and even structural damage. Of them, 16 were deemed ‘safe’ after being repaired, but six are still ‘unsafe’.

Six apartment buildings were under-construction, and investors have not shown urgency to complete these projects after the earthquake. Eco Housing and Realty Company had obtained permission to build a high-rise building with 106 flat units in Babar Mahal, but has shelved its project. Orchid Holdings has also cancelled its plan to build an apartment with 48 flat units in Rabi Bhawan.

At least 2,000 units are waiting buyers, and many families who left their damaged apartments after the earthquake are still scared to return there. Nepal

Land and Housing Developers Association (NLHDA) says Rs 135 billion has been invested in Kathmandu’s apartments, and a large portion of this investment is now at risk.

The earthquake did not damage all high-rises that form Kathmandu’s skyline. More than 30 of them withstand the jolt, and were deemed safe by a technical team of the DUDBC. But those that violated the building code and used substandard construction material, suffered structural damage, and this frightened buyers and investors alike.

“People are now scared to live in high-rise buildings, and this is because of a few unscrupulous builders,” says Minman Shrestha of NLHDA.

Bitayak Apartment in Bhaluwak nearly collapsed and would have killed 20 families living there. A Detail Damage Evaluation revealed it flouted guidelines.

“Artificially tinkering with the approved design can be disastrous,” says DUDBC engineer Sugar Krishna Joshi. The ISME Housing Company sold flats of Bitayak Apartment without a project completion certificate from the DUDBC.

In Kuleshwor, two blocks of eight-storey apartments of Oriental Colony also suffered heavy damage. Their pillars on the ground floor were cracked and the building nearly collapsed. An investigation revealed that the builder had not used as many iron rods as cited in the approved design. The DUDBC slapped a fine of Rs 50,000, and asked its owner to submit a retrofitting design.

“We need a policy to award those who build by the rule, and punish those who risk people’s lives by arbitrarily altering the design and using low-quality material,” says the DUDBC Kathmandu Division Chief Basanta Rai. “If not, it would be difficult to restore people’s faith in high-rises.”

(Centre for Investigative Journalism)
JESSICA CORTIS

How do you take the raw reality of remote Nepal, with all its poverty, discrimination, disease, birth and death and turn it into an uplifting story of sacrifice and dedication?

Nepal’s most accomplished documentary maker, Khesang Tseten, has a knack of bringing out the best in people. His latest film, Hospital, tells the story of how dedicated doctors strive valiantly to save lives in a remote Nepalese hospital in a rural mountainous district.

With raw footage of a mother giving birth to her baby in the first ten minutes of the film, Tseten tests us with shocking visuals and forces us to watch what it means to be a doctor and nurse in an under-equipped, understaffed, and over-burdened rural hospital.

In his trademark no-nonsense style, the director skillfully weaves together the diversity of Nepalese culture, the nature of humanity, and the state of Nepal’s health system into the storyboard to heighten the reality of saving lives where there is so little to work with and so much at stake.

“I had imagined hospitals to be associated with sickness and dying, but I soon saw the beauty in how people deal with the array of situations they are faced with,” he told Nepal Times after the KIJMF show on Sunday.

Tseten’s interest in capturing the organic portrayal of Nepali people in his films is nothing new. His previous documentaries have brought audiences close with migrant workers and their families, people caught up in conflict, the recruitment of Gurkha soldiers, and the yet-to-be-released The Trembling Mountain, which won second prize this year at KIJMF, looks at how faith and a sense of community allowed Langtang villagers to recover from last year’s tragedy.

Tseten is a documentary maker in the true sense, he says he is only trying to document in film nepal’s pluralistic society with its diverse range of characters, and how they cope with hardships.

“I find the characters in my films to be very lyrical, and I tend not to say that I’m doing this for humanity, I’m just interested in people and their social setting,” Tseten says modestly. Indeed, the film maker lets his characters speak for themselves, there is no preachiness or prescription, and no conclusion and closure.

Indeed, the film maker has been criticised for documentaries that lack in clear take-home message. But one of the things that keeps Tseten going is his love of encountering experiences and transmitting them into a form of expression. The biggest challenge, he believes, is trying to transform how something can be done.

Tseten wanted to be a writer and graduated in journalism from Columbia University in New York, but after his first book was rejected by a publisher, he started exploring film-making.

“The sensibility is the same, so I don’t feel I have changed because of the medium,” Tseten explains. “I don’t make films that are morally one dimensional because that’s not how the world is. I make the film to discover the film.”

Mentored by the Buddhist notices of Sunita (Nothingness), Tseten lives by the belief that nothing is intrinsically or eternally real. Informed by this mantra, he develops a level of relativity in all his films.

“I try to break down the juggledness and judgemental nature and capture the essence of the subject,” he says, and Hospital is a true example of the way Tseten uses juxtaposition and camera cuts to highlight this. The carefully considered piecing together of footage from patients within the hospital offers a visual insight into the humanity in Nepalis, and sometimes the lack of it.

The filmmaker admits that whilst many of his documentaries are too sad, they hold a degree of relevance and offer hope. As he said in his KIJMF Award in 2012, Tseten uses cinema verite technique to film the recruitment process, bringing out the desperation, hopes and disappointments of would-be recruits with sometimes tragic comic humour.

“It’s more than work for me. It becomes artistic where there is an interest in my own people, society and issues which is what I present,” Tseten tells us. “Gurkha recruitment is a part of Nepali history, so while going off to join the Gurkhas is tragic, there’s also an aspect of humanity that cannot be ignored.”
THE BOU

True of the Bouddhanath

I

Claudia Gaebel from Germany looking at the great white dome of Bouddhanath. It’s Gaebel’s first visit to Nepal and for her, the trip has been a spiritual one.
Although busier and louder than Lumbini, she also feels the area surrounding the Bouddhanath Stupa is more integrated than Swayambhunath. Since its reopening, tourists like Gaebel have returned to the site, and the stupa is once more alive with the soft chant of Buddhist monks.

Roadhouse Café

Dine on Italian pizza baked in wood-fired ovens. Enjoy cheesy delights in the bright and sun-warmed rooftop terrace which offers a panoramic view of Bouddhanath and creates an intimate vibe for friends to meet up over a cappuccino.
(01) 4916446

Pho 99 Vietnamese Noodle House

This local Nepali chain offers a variety of traditional Vietnamese dishes and drinks. House Special noodle soup has an authentic taste. Appetizers are refreshing but the most interesting are the spring rolls. If you love PHO, it is recommended that you have the imported traditional Vietnamese coffee in its distinctive tulip glass style cup.

Tushita Heaven Handicrafts

This is the place where you can learn thangka painting from scratch with courses and facilities for beginners and a cozy studio for students to practice. It usually takes three to four years for a person to fully master the art of thangka painting, so if time is of the essence, consider buying some of the work done by Tushita’s junior artists.
(01) 4916246, www.thangkatushita.com

Harati Maa Handicraft

After the earthquake last year, shops in Bouddhanath experienced dwindling sales. The number of Chinese tourists, who form the bulk of the customers, decreased by half. But the price of silver jewellery and Buddha statues are the same as before the earthquake. Brilliant handicrafts that will make the perfect souvenirs and presents for folks back home.
(01) 4916625, www.haratimaa.web.com

Boudha Stupa Thangka Centre

Master the art of thangka painting with the help of local craftsmen in this cozy workshop overlooking the back of the stupa. Open a productive day learning about Buddhist philosophy. Open six days a week, the centre also offers one-day training including a crash course in colouring, canvas matting, colour making, filling colours, shading and more. Purchase an intricately done thangka or two from the art school which has been around for more than a decade.
(01) 4916440
UDHA KORA

and the smell of burning incense. It is hard to believe the shrine was covered in scaffolding just a month ago.

Showing a small group of British travelers around, tour guide Surj Sharma says he had no customers for six months after the April 2015 earthquake. But tourist numbers are up again, and even the reconstruction of the stupa became an attraction.

“IT IS A UNESCO World Heritage site so many tourists were interested to see how the work was being carried out,” said Sharma. “Buddhism is not a religion but a way of life, tourists come because they enjoy the vibe of the place.”

Restoration work on the stupa began in May 2015 with generous contributions from Buddhist groups and volunteers, and the shrine is the first heritage site in Kathmandu to be reconstructed since the earthquake.

Chinese tourist Jianfeng Zhang says he cannot tell any difference between the reconstructed stupa and the original when he visited in 2012. “I love it here because it’s an amazing place to photograph,” he said.

Jessica Cortes, Sven Rau, Pari Lai, and Gyu Tian

Sechen Monastery

The green lawn of the monastery lends a pleasant backdrop for the Buddhist milieu who often walk in the garden. Admire the Buddhist architecture and quaint colours that brighten up the surroundings. With an abundance of shade, find yourself a seat and meditate or sit with a friend and enjoy the peace that Boudhanath brings to all who visit.

Rabbel Garden Café

Make your way to the peaceful gardens of the Sechen Monastery. A veranda and courtyard owned with greenery makes for a serene atmosphere. The vegetarian menu offers a range of freshly prepared dishes including homemade pusa, quiche, pies and traditional Nepali cuisine. With all proceeds from the café going to the Monastery, you won’t regret spending money on a meal here.

guesthouse.nepal@sechen.org (01) 5178229

Himalayan Java

The most western-style coffee shop in Boudhanath. Started in 1999, Himalayan Java has become a local coffee chain. Offering a spacious and rear surrounding, enjoy an espresso made from local coffee beans which have a unique and special taste. The manager says the goal is to be the Starbucks of Nepal. Judge for yourself.

(01) 4422519

Kunga Restaurant

Indulge in Tibetan cuisine and culture as you share a meal with friends in outdoor tents. Choose from a wide menu range catering to all types of taste. For a real Tibetan experience this writer, thank the traditional noodle soup would be a good choice.

(01) 4915117

White Gompa

A few minutes walk from the stupa, the relics of the monastery damaged during the April 2015 earthquake has not been repaired yet. But one can still go for a stroll stroll or give a spot in the huge grounds of the monastery and meditate for a while.

Sound Planetarium

Experience peace and calm with a quick sound therapy session away from the hustle and bustle of the stupa and a stone’s throw away from the White Gompa. Treatment for vikala, menstrual cycle regulation and PMS to Aura Haraminisation, the planetarium has it all. Also opt for training courses and a weekly talk. Take home with you the art of therapy but also some计划 hearing bowls from the shop offering a variety of these healing bowls.

www.soundplanetarium.com, info@soundplanetarium.com,
9843193204 / 9823086179

nepaltimes.com

Times

16 - 22 December 2016

4837
**Bird trail.**
Head out to Pashupati hill for a day of birdwatching with fellow bird lovers led by Suresh Chaudhary.
17 December, 7 am onwards; Meeting point: Ghodawati Bazaar, (01) 441903-443013

**Christmas party.**
Food, drinks, live French music, games and surya ni at Alliance Francaise Kathmandu.
17 December, 2 to 6 pm; Alliance Francaise Kathmandu, Tika, (01) 4404182

**Yoga bootcamp.**
Mark your calendars for rigorous, energetic and intense four days of yoga bootcamp.
18 to 21 December, Swarnaja Wellness and Yoga Centre, Jyoteshwar

**Phantom of the Opera.**
Mark your calendars for the re-adaptation of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s. The Phantom of the Opera by Malipa International School students.
20 December, 5 pm onwards; 21 December, 3 pm onwards; Nepal Academy Hall, Tickets Available at School City Office, Kamal, (01) 419119, Vibhav Modak, Konkani, (01) 440305, School Office, (01) 440300

**Acoustic night.**
Tap the beans and hum to the tunes as Adrian Pradhan, Armadha Rata Upreti, Nupriya Shrestha, Neelakesh Kumar belt out some of their hits.
27 December, 7 pm onwards, Kcano, Tilgveri

**Live performance.**
Get into the Christmas spirit and come along to a Day of Live Performances by 1978 A.D. Sabin Rai, Suyog Pokharel, Amrita Jyoti and more. With mouth watering food from restaurants all around Nepal, don’t miss out on a fun day of music.
25 December; 11 am to 6 pm; Jawahalal Nehru Ground, 386106827

**Ghar e-kalaah.**
Serving the best of North Indian cuisine, with live Sarod recitals on some days.
Hotel Annapurna, Darbar Marg, (01) 4219711

**Hyatt Regency.**
Christmas goodies at offer. Choose your favourite from a variety of tarts, puddings, cookies and chocolates.
16 to 21 December, 12 to 8 pm, Lobby lounge, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu, Boudha, (01) 577224

**Music for a cause.**
Be a part of this music event, organised by Drupeko, to raise funds for a pilgrimage for senior citizens.
27 December, 3 pm onwards, Behind Shechen Monastery, Mukund, 9801136862

**Haus Cafe.**
Passes, music, desserts – Haus does everything with equal perfection. Facebook: (01) 2217177

**Darbar Restaurant and Bar.**
Darbar specialising in delicious Japanese food and drinks, and also Continental and Nepali staples; spacious parking and a lush green garden.
Hotel Kan Das, Kunupkashi, (01) 45801077

**Atithi Resort.**
A perfect place to stay, surrounded by pools, massages, sauna, and delicious food of your choice. Samalam, Lakeside, Pokhara, (061) 493620, info@atithiresort.com

**Balthali Village Resort.**
A small, cozy retreat with a bird’s eye view of theBhagmati fields dotted with white painted houses.
Balthali, lush, 9841676428

**Hotel Landmark.**
Made entirely from traditional Nepali brick and woodcraft, this hotel is rich not only in heritage, but also in services and boasts an award winning restaurant, The Hungry Fry.
Pokhara, (069) 4936078/49364897, www.landmarkpokhara.com

**Temple Tree Resort and Spa.**
A peaceful place to stay, complete with a swimming pool, massage parlour, and spa. Kirtipur, (03) 4936819

**Raniban Retreat.**
Situated at the other end of the Phewa lake and nestled music-fueled Raniban forest and the World Peace Stupa, this retreat has one of the best views of the Annapurna range, Phewa lake, and Pokhara.
World Peace Pagoda, Pokhara, (061) 492759, 9841302563

**MISS MOTIVATION**

**KIRIJA JOSHI**

**The Embassy of Brazil in Kathmandu will promote the screening of four Brazilian feature films and documentaries**

**Free admission**

**Yala Maya Kendra on December 11th and 18th**

For Schedule: https://www.facebook.com/embassybrazilkathmandu/timeline

Located at House no. 155, Chundewal Marg, Maharajgunj, Kathmandu, Nepal. Tel no. 471482/613
The electric age

The Soul finally makes driving battery cars comfortable and affordable in Kathmandu

KUNDA DIXIT

A s a journalist writing on environmental issues, being seen driving an electric car a decade ago was supposed to be a statement. Then, with chronic fuel shortages and last year’s Blockade it became a necessity. Now, with the next generation of battery-powered crossovers coming into the market, there is no need anymore to punish yourself to be green.

The early model Revva bug was the size of a Mercury spaceship, and it took the dexterity of a commando to get in and out. But it was pain we were willing to inflict on ourselves to forsake fossil fuels. The joke was on the drivers waiting for days in petrol queues at Salja or Army pumps as the Nepal Oil Corporation ensured a never-ending petrol shortage.

Taking a Kia Soul eV on a test flight to Bhaisepati last week, it seemed that all the sacrifice of the past ten years was worth it. Here, finally, is a battery car that has all the comforts and perks of the latest SUV for a fraction of the price because taxes on electric vehicles have been slashed. Besides, if you are a climate denier and embarrassed in the Age of Trump to flaunt a green image, then the Soul eV looks exactly the same outside and inside as the fossil Soul. No one need know you have gone green. The car even has a virtual engine sound to fool neighbors.

After driving tiny semi-experimental battery guinea pigs for a decade, it is good to see that environmental awareness and advances in lithium battery technology have propelled electric vehicles to go mainstream internationally. At the top of the food chain you have the high-caste Mirai. the third tier is populated by the likes of Chevy Volt, Volkswagen e Golf, Nissan Leaf, and the subject of our review today, the Kia Soul eV.

The Soul is a five-door hatchback with a range of up to 180km, with an interior as spacious as a 30V with plenty of leg and belly room. The 109HP motor under the front hood is powered by 32.7KWH of lithium iron polymer batteries located under the rear seats. Like all electric vehicles, the torque is phenomenal especially when zooming off from stationary position. Full charging with the supplied 10A plug takes about 6 hours, but the car is also equipped for a DC CHAdeMO which allows full fast-charge in 30 minutes. Kia is trying to install the first of these in Kurintar so you can charge your Kia while having lunch on the way to Pokhara.

To appeal to customers used to luxury crossovers and the finer things in life, Kia has added gimmicks like heated and cooled seats (even at the back), heated steering wheel (so you don’t need gloves in winter), keyless entry, full sun roof, mood lighting like in 787 Dreamliners, and an autostop so that you don’t slide backwards downhill on the Bhaisepati slope. (The Soul doesn’t have handbrakes).

For those of you with fancy cars accustomed to envision looks from pedestrians, the boxy Kia’s goofy demeanour will be a bit of a let-down. This car doesn’t get wolf-whistles. But, hey, beauty is in the eye of the beholder and as long as the interior is comfortable who cares what other drivers think – let them wait in the petrol lines.

Internationally, however, the Soul will face stiff competition from the Tesla Model 3 which is priced even cheaper than the Soul eV at $35,000, is sleekness personified, and has a 300km range. The Soul will also have to upgrade its battery to keep up with the range offered by next-gen Bolts and Leafs which are in the same price category.

After the Nepal government, in its infinite wisdom cut taxes this year, electric vehicles are suddenly more affordable. The Soul eV with a sunroof and other accoutrements is priced at Rs 3.8 million and the standard Soul eV is Rs 3.5 million – compared to the Rs 6.5 million for the petrol Soul. Tax-free electric vehicles are now down to 2.5% while fossil fuel cars are still at 24.3%. Savings in petrol and the annual Rs 30,000 road tax also make the Soul very cheap to operate.

Hybrids like Prius and Insight were made to Nepal, and Tesla won’t be here for a while. So, as the only electric car besides the Mahindra e20X reviewed for comparison, let’s currently available in Kathmandu, the Soul makes you swear.

e20 adds doors

Anyone who has been driving a Mahindra Reva e20X for a while knows the kind of comforts passengers have to make to get into the back seat. While most things about the first battery car in the Nepali market worked for Kathmandu, it was getting in and out that was a problem. Mahindra has solved this with the five-door e20 Plus which was launched in India last month and will soon be in showrooms here.

We have reviewed the e20X in this paper before and there isn’t much to add, except to highlight the new features in the Plus version. Squeezing of doors, the other inconvenience of the standard e20X was that the hatch had to be opened to plug the car for overnight recharge. The boot is now outside to make it look like a regular car.

Mahindra has made a wise decision to upgrade the e20X rather than cancel its asparagus teapot misted battery, and which didn’t sell well at all. I also kept the aerodynamic silhouette while adding tradmark Mahindra grille in front, closing the rear end, and making the car look much snappier.

The other important improvement is that the 72V lithium battery pack of the PW variant which gives the motor a peak torque of 31Nm and 40 HP. The PW therefore has a top speed now of an impressive 140Kmph and a range of 148km, 30 km more than the standard e20X. Other additions are an anti-block and a REVM1 home mode of 71km when the battery runs low.

The 74 kw/m3 is 42% less than the cost of the PW but has a range of only 110km. While some lose some.
Since his debut feature Highway (2012), Deepak Rauniyar has worked quietly and steadily towards honing his craft, and now with the international premiere of White Sun four years on, all of his hard work, focus, and passion have paid off in the form of this second, pertinent, quiet but intense film about politics, social conscience, the aftermath of war, and above all, that rare currency that is hope.

Highway already showed indications of the kind of filmmaker that Rauniyar aspired to be, and while it was not universally adored, personally, I thought that the film indicated the birth of a distinctive voice in Nepali cinema, one that strives towards emulating neo-realism, setting aside the theatricalities that continue with emerging film-makers today who try to portray aspects of what aids our society but lack the maturity and discipline to ring true, despite (usually) the best of intentions.

The finest accomplishment of White Sun - the story of two brothers who went separate ways during the conflict in Nepal with one joining the Maoist insurgents and the other the police - is to bring the Nepali language, as it is really spoken colloquially, to the big screen without the cringe-worthy, histrionic cadences that have haunted former film productions.

The words that come out the mouths of the main characters, the brothers, Chandra (Gayahang Rai), Sunny (Rohindra Singh Baniya), and Durga (Asha Maya Magar), the estranged wife of Chandra, are quietly spoken and deeply truthful to the experience of the everyman and woman who has suffered through the conflict and encountered the ongoing apathy of Kathmandu-centric politicians oblivious to the grievances of the people who both fought for and elected them. Current ongoing grotesque injustices are personified by Durga’s inability to get her illegitimate daughter Pooja (Sumi Mali) a citizenship card, without which she cannot go to school; a first step of the many in denying those Nepalis without a nagarka any rights.

Example after example of the real struggles of the Nepali people are written into a carefully structured script that delicately touches on painful issues without assigning blame. As the film unfolds, we become deeply involved in the struggle that Chandra faces as he returns to his home village, confronted by the quandary of how to carry his deceased father’s body to the river through rough, rocky steep terrain with only his humble brother to help the rest of the villagers are either too young or too old to carry such a burden, plagued by guilt at the sight of the lovely, outspoken woman whom he abandoned during the war but stayed to take care of his ailing father, and followed around by a young orphaned boy, Budhi (Abhis Parayat) who thinks the world of him until he realises his role during the conflict.

White Sun or Seto Surya with its finely wrought, persuasive performances creates a rare piece of filmmaking. May there be many more to come from this talented voice that speaks for so many of us.

nepalitimes.com
"No polls in the Tarai"

Sadashivana Party Chair Rajaendra Mahata in an interview in Nepal Patrika, 15 December

The Madhesi parties have obstructed the restructuring of local government bodies, and are against elections to existing local bodies. What do you really want?

What if your rigidity causes federalism to fail?

That is what the three major parties want. By refusing to show flexibility on our demands, they are not only threatening federalism but all of our political achievements. Madhesi need federalism more than they do. The constitution they imposed on us is a betrayal of the mandate they got from the people. And the biggest proof of it is that they are still unable to go to the Tarai to defend the constitution they pushed through. Unless the constitution is made acceptable to Madhesi people, we reject every decision by the government, not just elections.

Dipak Gyawali in Himaal Khabarpatrika, (13-17 December)

Journey to Antarctica

BUTWAL — How many Nepalis have reached Antarctica? Not many. But three Nepalis who have reached the southern continent are living in Butwal and remember fondly their great adventure.

Bhuvan Singh Biswakarma (69), Ram Bahadur Khatri (56) and Arjun Kumar Thapa (34) are from Butwal and all served in the Indian Army, visiting Antarctica at different times during their military careers. Among them, Thapa was even part of a team that reached the South Pole in 2011 (picture, left).

Biswaekarma was actually felicitated by the Royal Palace as the first Nepali to reach Antarctica after going there as part of an Indian Army research team in 1986. Biswakarma still has a penguin egg that he brought back from there as a souvenir. He had taken Nepali topics on his expedition and has pictures of Indian scientists wearing the caps.

"There was a vast amount of ice, no human beings other than us," he recalls. "I was allowed to speak to my wife on the phone only once a month."

Biswaekarma and Khatri have already retired, but Arjun Kumar Thapa is still with the Indian Army. After celebrating his 29th birthday at 48 Colours on the South Pole, Thapa was on the Indian Army Everest Expedition in 2015. But his team returned from the Base Camp after the earthquake and deadly avalanche.

Thapa made it to the top this year, and says: "I found climbing Everest much easier than reaching the South Pole. The big difference is that Antarctica was pristine, but Mt Everest is full of litter."
Caught red handed with Red Pandas

SMRITI BASNET

Most news about the poaching of wildlife concerns charismatic mammals like tigers and rhinos, but lately there has been a mysterious spurt of smuggling of Red Panda hide within Nepal.

Last month alone, three men were arrested with pelts of Red Panda in Jorpati, and acting on a tip-off the Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) caught a 20-year-old Salu Khamboh boy with another Red Panda skin in Kapan. In the last four months there have been three raids all yielding pelts of the endangered Himalayan rarity which fetch a high price in Nepal. There were 13 seizures of dead Red Pandas in 2019/20 in Kathmandu, Rasuwa, Sindhupalchowk, Birtamod. Red Pandas now top the list of contraband wildlife that also includes pangolins, leopards, tigers, rhinos and deer.

"While the government has been focusing on large animals like tigers and rhinos, traders have diverted their attention to smaller ones like Red Panda," said Dambar Lama of Red Panda Network, which works to control poaching and conserve the animal’s habitat in Nepal, India, Burma and China.

Habitat destruction has caused the population of the shy animals in Nepal to dwindle to less than 1,000. The new threat of poaching puts the endangered mammal at high risk. The animal that lives on tree canopies in forests above 3,000m has been listed under Appendix I of CITES, the Vulnerable Category in the IUCN Red List and is also a protected mammal by the National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act 1973 of Nepal.

Officials are puzzled by the recent surge in Red Panda smuggling, but the CIB’s Prabin Pokhrel says it is due to “negligent awareness” among locals about the value of the pelt, and he dismisses links to larger international networks.

Bita, for his part, thinks Red Panda fur and skin are made into hats that are gifted to newlyweds in the Yamun and Sichuan provinces of China. In Nepal, some ethnic groups have traditionally used them for cultural and religious purposes.

Conservation Officer Bhuwan Raj Upadhyay once stationed in Rasuwa is convinced that Red Panda hides are being smuggled into China. Now Warden at the Auli Nampa Conservation Area in Darchula of far-western Nepal, Upadhyay says the preferred smuggling routes for wildlife contraband from India to China is through Tikkeri in Nepal to Talkot in Tibet.

"I don’t have the exact specifics but the tiger we seized could be from either Nepal or India," Upadhyay told us.

In the eastern Terai district of Jhapa, too, District Forest Officer Bodh Raj Subedi says some of the Red Panda hides seized could be from Darjeeling. “We don’t yet have DNA analysis to determine where the skins originate.,” Subedi said, adding that in the six months he has been posted in Jhapa deer skin and pangolin scales from India have been seized.

Jhapa and Darchula have been identified as hot spots for illegal wildlife trade transit points in Nepal along with Pokhara (see story, right), Kathmandu, Humla, Dolpa, Mahendranagar, Dhangadi and Nepalganj.

Madhav Khadka of WWF says: “Nepal is both a source and a transit for wildlife smuggling. There is no interdiction between these two but we cannot view them independently as well when it comes to fighting wildlife crimes because of our location between India and China.”

Guarding against poachers

Every month, Parvati Paudeel and Bhishnu Maya Chaudhary (painted, left) get dressed in matching black waterproof jackets and gumboots and set out to patrol the Bisharaju community forest in Dikur Pokhari, an hour’s drive from Kathmandu.

The two women are joined by seven others and, armed with sticks and wooden sticks, inspect the forests for wildlife traps set by poachers, and try to track poachers.

“We are ready to go anywhere if there is a need. We have grown up with the forest and preserving it is our duty,” said Parvati Paudeel, 60. Over the last three years, rampant poaching of wild pigeons and bunting deer for the illegal meat market in the city have all but stopped.

“Before we used to see flash lights in the middle of the night and even hear gun shots, but not anymore,” said 19-year-old Bhishnu Paudeel.

With active participation of village elders, and supported by the Harpy Eule initiative, the village has become a successful model for home-grow anti-poaching activities.

The young people have either migrated for work or are busy with tree studies so it is up to us older folk to preserve nature for our children,” said the leader of the anti-poaching unit, Durga Prasad Paudeel. 

Srijan Upreti in Koilak
Nepal’s target of doubling its tiger population could be undermined by new infrastructure criss-crossing Tarai forests

could have divided the Chitwan National Park into two islands, the Department of Railways is now designing an alternative route. But simply circumventing the core area of the park will not be enough to protect the park in which most of Nepal’s tigers live.

“Tigers roam around as far as the foothills of the Mahabharat range, so building a railway through the buffer zone instead of the core of the sanctuary is not enough. We need underpasses to allow unobstructed movement for tigers,” says Chitwan National Park wardens Ram Chandra Kandel.

The railway will not just threaten Chitwan, but the entire Tarai Arc Landscape — a jungle corridor for tigers and other wildlife. Besides the railway, Nepal is also building feeder roads in the Tarai, expanding the East-West Highway, new transmission lines and irrigation canals.

India is also building 550 km of road embankments along no man’s land, which threatens to flood Nepali territory and also restrain the cross-border movement of tigers.

WWF Nepal says such ‘linear infrastructure’, if built haphazardly, could cause the tiger populations to dwindle again by destroying their habitat, restricting movement and affecting genetic dispersal.

“This is insurer; decades of investment and effort in conservation are at risk because of the reckless infrastructure building,” says Santosh Mani Nepal of WWF Nepal.

To be sure, Nepal desperately needs better connectivity, greater agricultural productivity and economic growth, but conservation experts say it should not be achieved at the cost of endangering already endangered species.

Nearly a fourth of Nepal’s total area has been set aside as national parks and wildlife reserves, with 20 protected areas and 13 buffer zones. More than 10,000 sq km of the country’s territory can be considered tiger habitats.

But experts say the total area is deceptive because if the territory is criss-crossed by railways, highways, transmission lines or irrigation canals the habitat will not be conducive to tiger conservation.

Construction of infrastructure can be made wildlife-friendly, although it will cost more.

Knowledge of wildlife migration routes can be taken into account to build wildlife passes over highways and rail lines. Most tigers prefer to walk along predictable routes, and WWF Nepal has identified five crossing points in Kusaili, Kanchanpur and Bardiya and has proposed wildlife under-passes to facilitate their movement.

At least 10 wildlife passages have been proposed along the Narayangadh-Butwal section of the East-West Highway, which is being widened with support from the Asian Development Bank.

WWF India is also lobbying with the Indian government to build multiple under-passes along border roads to allow unrestricted trans-boundary movement for tigers.

Even if these measures are not taken, Nepal’s tiger population could reach the magic target of 242 tigers by 2022. But habitat fragmentation could soon dwindle the population of the endangered big cats after that.
New trafficking rules

Due to the amazing progress Nepal has made in the automobile industry by importing ever more cars even though there is no space left to drive them on, it is now possible to jet from Kathmandu to Kathmandu in 20 minutes and then spend the rest of the day getting into town from the airport. A traffic jam is a sure sign that a country’s macro-economic engine is in full swing and advancing at an astounding eight centimeters per hour on the Tukucha Bridge.

The winter solstice is approaching and the days are getting shorter, which leaves us less time to get from Point A to Point B, and this means we must always have a Plan B. Forget amendments to the constitution, what we really need are amendments to traffic rules to shorten times for commuters. The ever vigilant Valley Traffic Police is therefore instituting these new rules with immediate effect:

1. All sidewalks are hereby declared Motorcycles Only to make more space on the road for cars. In an emergency, motorcyclists can also use the pedestrian overhead bridges, and drive on top of cars like in the movies, to get to their destinations.
2. You may well ask, so where are the pedestrians supposed to walk? And that is a very good question. My advice would be for all would-be pedestrians to just stay indoors because you will just clog up the streets and slow down traffic.
3. Last week, after being stuck at Durbar Marg for two hours because of a vice-presidential motorcade, I finally figured out why he has two pickups full of heavily-armed commandos in front and behind his bombproof limo. It is to prevent angry commuters from tearing the Veep asunder.
4. Cows, dogs, rhesus monkeys, uncoordinated goats, zoo elephants, horse-drawn wedding carriages, water buffaloes, chicken, and other wildlife can cross the road at their own convenience as long as they can satisfactorily explain to traffic police on duty when asked why it is that they want to get to the other side in the first place.
5. Using a mobile while driving a motorcycle is not allowed, be smart and use a smartphone.
6. A helmet is compulsory. But your wife squating side-saddle behind you and your five-year-old sitting on the fuel tank don’t need helmets.
7. A street centreline is just a suggestion, you may drive on the wrong side of the road at any time.
8. In the interest of road safety, seat-belts have been made mandatory at all times, even if your car hasn’t moved since approximately 6:30 yesterday morning. This is to retrain drivers who want to get out and strangle someone.
9. Since passengers are going to be spending so much time in their cars, vehicles are required by law to be self-contained and retrofitted with the following accessories by January First:
   a. Toilet with shower
   b. Small restaurant and bar
   c. Gym with treadmill
   d. Broadband/Internet connection
   e. Hypertension alarm to warn drivers if their blood pressure is hitting the roof in which case the car automatically turns into an ambulance with flashing lights and a siren which can rush to the nearest hospital and get there sometime in the course of the new year
   f. A fully-functioning barbershop with pedicure
   g. For emergencies, all cars must have rocket-propelled ejection seats.

The Ass