Breathing space

A smartphone survey last month ranked what Kathmandu’s long-suffering residents are most worried about: air and water pollution topped the list, followed by health and education.

For the first time in 19 years, the municipalities of the three main cities in the Valley will have a chance to vote for representatives to Wards and Municipal Councils to try and fix these problems. It will not be an easy task, and some candidates have been making wildly unrealistic promises of underground meterails and flyovers. Tired of established parties botching it over and over again, voters seem to be attracted to younger candidates of alternative parties like Aama, Jhakkocho, and Boxer, who are riding the social media wave to promise cleaner cities and more efficient local government.

In the rest of Nepal there was a political vacuum at the local level after the Maoists killed and threatened local leaders, and then in 2002 the royal regime cancelled local elections. This led to 15 years of plunder of rivers, mountains and forests by a mafia enjoying political protection. Worryingly, the time candidates for many of the Village and Municipal Councils are tainted figures trying to get elected to powerful local government units. “There was no accountability, and corruption became part of grassroots governance,” laments Krishna Prasad Sapkota in our Guest Editorial on page 2. “Finally we have a chance to revive inclusive grassroots democracy.”

This election is important because for the first time Nepalis will be voting not for VDCGs and DDCGs, which were just local administrative units, but for Ward, Village, Municipal, and Metropolitan councils that are empowered to make laws, raise revenue and fix policy. There are also quotas for women and Dalits, and although more than 90 per cent of candidates to head local councils are men, parties are obliged to nominate a woman for one of the two senior local posts.

Preparations for the much-delayed elections were hurried because of the deadlock over the Constitution. A compromise to hold it in two phases has its own dangers. But this election, with all its flaws, is of symbolic importance because it finally brings the new Constitution into force.

Kunda Dixit

GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY
Special Nepali Times supplement on Local Elections 2017
NATIONALLY LOCAL EDITORIAL
RESUSCITATING DEMOCRACY
GUEST EDITORIAL BY KRISNAN PRASAD SAPKOTA PAGE 2

Political power of the ballot
The local elections are vital in shaping the prospect of the 2017 polls to federal development.

Online campaigning by SONIA AWALE PAGE 3
Trial and error democracy by AMITH RAJ PAGE 14-15

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SUPPLEMENT
NATIONALLY LOCAL

It’s only now becoming clear how close Nepal and its democracy came to a fatal plunge last week as the executive and the judiciary faced each other off at the edge of a precipice.

Finally, on Sunday, Nepal will start the arduous process of holding the first of three tiers of elections under the new constitution for Local, Provincial and Federal Councils. Hopefully with greater accountability there will be less of a reign, and confrontations like the last one will not happen.

Never before in Nepal’s turbulent history, not even in the bad old days of the absolute monarchy, was the judiciary dealt such a severe knock. The fact that two alpha males of Nepali politics went for a constitutional instrument of last resort just because their fingers were crossed, expressed just how shallow their commitment to democracy is. Going against every principle and the separation of powers, the executive branch has uprooted a legislature to bring down the judiciary.

By blatantly undermining a judiciary which has played an active role on transparency and justice cases, the coalition elected sharp criticism from the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR).

The Supreme Court ruled on a writ petition on 30 April to reinstate Chief Justice Karki. Since then, both the coalition partners as well as the judiciary have pulled back from the edge – probably with the intention of not letting the dispute disrupt the first phase of local elections on 14 May. Parliament has been plunged in primaries and the impeachment motion elapsed for now. The Chief Justice, for her part, has reportedly said she will not hear any more cases till the result next month.

This unnecessary crisis had added another element of uncertainty to local elections but now that both sides have pulled back, voting will go ahead in three of the six provinces on Sunday. As our reports in this issue show (page 14-15), there is considerable anticipation among Nepalis that the first local body elections in two decades will finally value in an era of development and inclusion.

This is the first election under the new Constitution and the resulting village and municipal councils will have far more decentralised decision-making powers on local revenue generation and budget than the UDA and DEGs ever did. The new 4,000 VDC boundaries were designed for an age when Nepal was largely rural and there was poor connectivity. The Maoists decimated elected VDC representatives during the conflict, and Deuba, during his second tenure as prime minister, cancelled scheduled local elections in 2002. Now, the new 481 village, 246 municipal, and 17 metropolitan councils have the economic and political autonomy to use their economies of scale to fast-track development.

We have been shown how the three-party political landscape, in the absence of elected local bodies, has pocketed development grants and plundered rivers and forests with political protection over the past decades. There is now a danger that the political-military matrix that provided from the lack of grassroots accountability is building candidates for village and municipal councils. Combatant. The newly enhanced decision-making powers of local councils, this could spell disaster.

Our only hope is that people at the local level are far more aware of who the crooks are, and will judge wisely when they enter the booth voting on Sunday.

Bracing for a new beginning

By Krishna Prasad Sapkota

GUEST EDITORIAL

Resuscitating democracy

In a nation without representation in one of the university campuses, seats of democracy, But Nepal was forced to pay taxes without representation in the government for the last 15 years. We denied Nepal’s people, but we ignored the fundamental values of democracy.

Yet local government posts existed in 1997 against 2012. The people’s elected representatives were represented by a political class that worked hand in glove with multi groups to benefit to make sure that the rest of the roads and educational development in the future of the next generation of Nepalis. This is the big injustice since the mass uprising of pro- democracy movement in 1990 and 1991, we elected elected local units of the government that had limited authority and resources, the time, we are demanding development grants local revenue generation, capacity building, and legal and judicial authority. The local government is organizing to organize local level election.

With greater power comes greater responsibility. If they fail, government fails and decentralization will be meaningless. If such representatives lack the will to participate, all the more reason to continue politicizing our natural resources, the result will be even more disastrous.

When people enter the polling booth on 14 May, they must serve candidates, not parties. Their votes in local elections are their voices directly from their local public in parliamentary elections.

Krishna Prasad Sapkota is the former Executive Director of the Association of Urban Development Committees in Nepal (AUDC).
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The grounds for impeachment were so evidently whimsical, and the process so undemocratic and unparliamentary, that it sparked spontaneous protests from the general public and drew sharp international criticism.

Although the Supreme Court has now annulled the impeachment motion by an interim judgment, the political crisis has led bare fault lines in the new Constitution, triggering a debate about provisions for the separation of powers. But that may be turning the gaze in the wrong direction. When the new republic is striving to ensure that the Constitution gets wide acceptance, this self-inflicted damage by the clique of top leaders has raised serious doubts about the survival of Nepal’s democracy itself. It proved beyond doubt that the top political leaders of the country are not just part of the problem, they are the problem.

The Constitution that is supposed to institutionalise the federal republic is yet to be implemented. The first step would be the three tiers of elections this year. With some of the Madhesi forces ready to be part of the process, with some conditions, the battle was only half won. But at such a crucial time, what the NC’s Sher Bahadur Deuba and the MC’s Pushpa Kamal Dahal did was utterly reckless.

It is now clear that the impeachment move was a result of a conspiracy to keep Chief Justice Karki off some high-profile corruption cases for the two months that remained of her tenure. It was also an act of revenge for her refusing to step down, especially Deuba, who was prevented by a court order from appointing a police chief of his choice.

Post-conflict consensus politics, now a decade-long malpractice with intricate and interconnected dark areas, has spawned a culture of opaque decision-making by all organs of the state. This in turn developed a sense of entitlement in top leaders. The silence of civil society and the international community in support of the democratic process has in the past few years made the situation worse. Finally, it was the UN human rights office (OHCHR) that deprecated the impeachment move because of what it meant for the transitional justice process.

Along with the lack of elected local government, transitional politics has created a corrupt eco-system that has turned the country into a nexus of crime and politics, with the top leaders at the helm. Their undemocratic internal decision making was no secret, but this crisis has shown just how dismissive they can be of international norms, public opinion and the democratic culture.

The choice of candidates for local elections is another proof of this political decay. The mayoral candidate of the Nepali Congress for Bhaktapur Metropolitan City was forced to withdraw by NC President Deuba. This despite open protests by party workers refusing to help the candidate from the Maoist party, Renu Dahal, the Prime Minister’s daughter.

The main political parties have become the root cause of this democratic degradation. The inability of the lower ranks of the parties, as elected representatives of the people, to stand against the whims of the top leaders shows just how much they have let down the country and its people. Much acceptance by the Young Turks in the main parties of the dictatorial style of top leaders has killed any hope of change in the near future.

The only hope now is for the emergence of a strong, alternative political force. Some of these new entities are fielding candidates in coming elections and could bring about sweeping change to brush away the established parties. That is the only way democracy can be saved.
democracy development?
over which comes first: economic growth or an open society

and multilateral agencies such as the World Bank, ADB and UNDP. Democratic regimes, through their participatory decision-making approach, are expected to generate a greater sense of ownership and ensure policy sustainability. In addition, democratic checks and balances with different forms of accountability mechanisms are said to promote transparent and reliable service delivery and inclusive development.

However, in practice there are many challenges to reaching a consensus among numerous competing and fragmented interests. Such negotiations can be time-consuming and often focus on short-term results to please electorates, which can trump long-term views for development. Hence, many theorists and policymakers argue that authoritarian regimes might be best suited to deliver economic development, as they can ensure stability as well as take and implement long-term decisions beyond electoral cycles. Such arguments are largely

based on the experiences of “Asian Tigers” (Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea) that were able to achieve unprecedented and sustained economic growth from the 1960s to the 1980s under strong leadership and/or one-party systems. Similar arguments are used to explain rapid economic development in China and Vietnam.

However, there are also plenty of countries, including Nepal during the Panchayat system, where authoritarian regimes have failed to deliver economic development and prosperity – while countries like India, Brazil and South Africa have managed to achieve high economic growth despite being democracies.

There is no definitive answer about which form of regime can best guarantee economic development, as it is highly context specific and largely dependent upon the individual state’s vision and strategies for growth. But if development is considered not just in economic terms but also as a realisation of social, political and civil rights, then democracy does offer greater opportunities. Considering the prominence of democracy as the most acceptable form of government in countries like Nepal, it is important to assess how it can be made more effective to deliver inclusive and equitable development.

The contemporary Nepali democratic regime is largely characterised by personality-driven politics, patronage systems, endemic corruption and lack of public trust in formal democratic institutions, including major political parties. At the same time, public discontent is increasingly manifested through grassroots movements, civil society and the creation of alternative political parties. Democratic elections, therefore, do offer an opportunity to challenge the status quo, with wider implications for socio-economic development and consolidation of democratic political culture.

Sangita Thapa Limbu, an analyst at Sale Development Direct. www.sdfirde.org.uk

Nepal rebounds
Economic growth has rebounded strongly in Nepal, reaching 7.5% in fiscal year 2017, the highest rate since 1994, according to the World Bank’s latest Nepal Development Update. The reasons are one of the best monsoons in recent years, increased electricity availability and investment in infrastructure reconstruction. This follows a 14-year low of 0.4% growth last year due to the civil blockade. Rice production this year grew by 4.2 million tonnes, and 1004MW of new hydropower capacity was added. Tourism also nearly recouped pre-crisis levels in autumn 2015, and remittances have grown. However, imports have grown while exports remain sluggish and the trade deficit with India continues to rise. While remittances increase, a lot at a similar pace, external sector pressures are building.

Redmi Note 4
Xiaomi has launched the Redmi Note 4S in Nepal. It has a 5.5-inch FHD LCD IPS display, metal body, 5MP rear camera, and 3MP front camera with MIUI 8 based on Android 6.0 (Marshmallow). The smartphone is priced at Rs 28,499. Pre-bookings are available until 3 May. www.xiaomi.nepal.com/buying

HTC smartphones
Generation Next Communications Pvt. Ltd, the authorized distributor for HTC smartphones, in Nepal, has launched its much awaited new models: HTC U Play, HTC One A9S and Desire 825. HTC U Play is priced Rs 49,999, HTC One A9S Rs 28,600 and HTC Desire 825 Rs 18,900. Customers will get a 1-year warranty on all HTC products.

Deluxe whiskey
Allied traders and Distilleries Pvt. Ltd (ATD) has launched its deluxe whiskey brand, Officer’s Choice Blue, in Nepal. Officer’s Choice Blue is a premium variant of Officer’s Choice, a unique blend of Scotch malts and selected grain spirits.

TK’s laptop service
Turkish Airlines has now started offering its business class passengers the use of laptops on its US-bound flights. Passengers who deliver their personal laptops to authorized TK staff before the flight can use it during the journey. The same service will be available on the airline’s UK bound flights from 12 May 2017.

New FIFA partner
Qatar Airways has announced that it will be the Official Partner and Official Airline of FIFA, with a contract extending to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. As an official Partner of FIFA, the airline will have extensive marketing and branding rights at the next two World Cups.

Winning golfers
The 2015 Cambang Golf Series was began on May 13. The event was organized by 36 Golfers, Ang Dorge Sherpa and Wang Chen.

LED Lounge
TFM LED, a US-based brand, has inaugurated its biggest LED showroom in Kathmandu. The flagship store will offer advanced lighting design solutions for residential, commercial, outdoor and industrial lighting. Some of the products on display are large LED ceiling lights, compact LED ceiling lights, LED garden luminaries and wall sconces.

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Preserving our Valley

Professor Eduard Sekler’s enduring legacy of heritage and conservation in Nepal

“Arrive strawberries in the Champagne a bit over the top,” quipped Julia Chung Blach, the petite American Ambassador to Nepal, whirling onto the balcony of her official residence in Kathmandu like a mini tornado. She is just back from the embassy and the reception is due to start in 20 minutes.

“No, it’s so special,” says Erin Theophilis, “mean your summery sparkling wine is such a treat, plus the new strawberries from Kakani. Besides, how pretty it looks!”

Erin leans forward better to converse with Julia with her winning smile and floppy blond charm. Nodding, she hurries on to the next detail. “The displays look great but have we got plenty of information leaflets? There must be enough for every guest.”

Erin and I spoke of her valley of dreams. We have long been working together on the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT)’s launch in the elder Nepali community and rulers, making sure it goes without a hitch.

“No first. I will say a few words of welcome and then Erin will explain Professor Sekler’s vision and the current restoration plans. Right? I am determined that this American organisation will make a significant difference towards the protection and awareness of Nepal’s monuments. Julia’s beats Dick commandingly on the marble floor and her words reiterate as she heads upstairs to change: ‘I suppose my husband is still playing golf...’”

Funded in 1990, the private, non-profit Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust’s mission is to safeguard the extraordinary and threatened architectural heritage of the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal. It is the brainchild of Harvard architectural historian Eduard Sekler, then team leader of the UNESCO Campaign to Safeguard the Cultural Heritage of the Kathmandu Valley, and a highly acclaimed coeditor of restoration in Nepal. With his enduring Venetian accent, Professor Sekler had asked me to be a founding director of the Trust, and to help Erin, his former student and KVPT’s American director, to establish a program of activities.

Erin has assembled a talented Newari team and generated support from the community, Dr Shushrula Amatya and his Majesty’s Department of Archaeology. Concentrating on the finest urban landscapes in the world, the Marc Gulay is already restored, and work on Radha Krishna and Uma Maha temple is underway.

It was in May 1992, and the exhibition in the Ambassador’s garden presents a backlash record of KVPT’s first years to guests and diplomats. Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala and his cabinet head the list of nearly 500 Nepali dignitaries, dignitaries and donors who throng Julia’s lawn.

Erin and I planned the event while returning on his motorcycle from a visit to our Narada Busha hilltop, a very small space with a massive panoramic view of forested hills, deforested hills and white mountains beyond. Surveying down the bunny trail of lights and moon, we are to hear the noise and dust until eventually we reach the medieval apartment on Dharahara Square. After climbing the narrow stairs, we sit uncomfortably crisscrossed on the small faces beneath the old ceiling, sipping sweet black tea and peering out through the curved window across the cluster of temple roofs.

In between our excited KVPT discussions, I persuade Erin to design our new house on land recently found in Budhanilkantha. The site overlooks the valley, bordered by the source of the Manakamana river lined with alders and bamboo, and huge rocky terraces are the surrounding fields. Erin incorporates Kaila, Mallu and Newari themes into a design featuring teakwood floors, jingpotina tiles and traditional building methods. With the help of the Kathmandu Museum and the British Resident, Kathmandu House was eventually built with the help of Kaila Nepali, KVPT’s head architect. We all hoped it might influence the Valley’s plethora of modern concrete homes as an adaptation of Nepal’s unique architectural legacy.

Today, KVPT has expanded from strength to strength, attaining accolades and acclaim under Rohit Pachauri’s leadership with new arts projects and a bevy of committed Nepalis and international backers, successfully realizing the original vision of the inspirational Professor Sekler. Guiding the earthquake rebuilding and still focused on Nepal, the KVPT remains enthusiastically supported by the American Embassy and its successive ambassadors.

Professor Eduard Sekler died on 1 May 2017 in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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Kathmandu, 05.05.2017

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Hate is not a Nepali value

The Laramie Project returns to Kathmandu with stories from Nepal

The original Laramie Project presented interviews of family, friends, police officers and the murderers in order to learn more about the victim and the crime itself. The follow-up returns to some of the same people to ask them about changes in attitudes, policies and legislation. But more importantly, this particular One World Theatre production, jointly directed by Bruno Decouzelier and Rachman Pudasaini, incorporates LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer) stories from Nepal itself.

Presented in Nepal, these stories are based mainly on true, personal narratives from LGBTQI authors in Pride Climbing Higher, a writing project from Creative Nepal, in collaboration with Blue Diamond Society (BDS). The project provides an opportunity for students, journalists and policy makers to reflect and debate important social issues like HIV, LGBTQI rights, anti-hate crime legislation, the role of media and how communities attempt to define themselves and react to their pasts.

The One World production of The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later has a cast of 13 (pictured) composed of both professional actors - some of whom reprise their roles from the 2013 play - and members of the LGBTQI community. This non-for-profit piece of theatre, made in collaboration with BDS, is supported by Save the Children and UNAIDS Nepal. This particular production is dedicated to Martin Sensier Torres, one of the 40 victims of the 2009 shooting in a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. It is also dedicated to the victims of ongoing gay persecution in Chechnya, crimes that highlight the work that remains to ensure the rights of the LGBTQI community.

Nepal is leading the fight against intolerance in this region. It is therefore all the more important for us to become sensitised to issues that affect a significant proportion of people here and worldwide. As we enter a phase of intolerance unprecedented on a global scale, we must remember that "life is so precious," as one of the Nepali characters in the production points out. And that we "gotta take responsibility for ourselves, what we think and what we say and what we do," as the police officer who found Matthew in 1998 says.

A segment of Ten Years Later will be performed on Wednesday, 17 May, the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, as part of the BDS's annual event to mark the day. The play itself will run 19-28 May at the Nepal Tourism Board.

Decouzelier's words ring true: "What can I say but express the hope that Laramie will touch you as it did me?"

Karno Dasgupta

The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later
One World Theatre
Nepal Tourism Board
Premier: 17 May 5:30 PM
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Reservations: +977 8809150950
Political power of the ballot

Although the first local elections in Nepal were held towards the end of the Rana regime in 1947, and women got the right to vote in first municipal polls in Kathmandu in 1933, it was not until 1959 that the first party-based local elections were held. The Nepali Congress won the Khalanga Municipality and the deputy position went to the Royal Communist Party. After King Mahendra’s coup in 1960 and during the Panchayat System, there was no Village, District and Municipal elections were held from 1962 onwards. After the People’s Movement of 1990, the following local polls were held:

1992 - Village Panchayats were reformed. Village Development Committees and elections were held for 3,965 VDCs, 75 DCs and 33 Municipalities. The Nepal Congress swept the elections, winning 63 of the 75 districts.

1997 - By the time the next local elections were held, the tables were turned and the UML swept 86 of the 75 districts, leaving the NC with only 22. The UML also won 41 of the 50 Municipalities.

2005 - King Gyanendra tried to hold local elections after his coup, but this was boycotted by most parties.

HISTORY OF LOCAL POLLS

LOCAL ELECTION RESULTS 1997

GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY

No confusion

With zero hour in effect, candidates had to stop all campaigning as of midnight on Thursday. All polling day on Sunday morning when booths will open in three provinces conducting the first phase of polls.

There is still lingering confusion among voters about how to vote correctly. In Kathmandu, the ballot paper is the size of a broadsheet newspaper. The stopwatch stamp has to be placed on seven boxes, and the paper folded in the proper way.

Much of the confusion stems from the use of two election symbols in the seventh column of the ballot paper (plotted). The Election Commission (EOC) published a front-page notice in major Nepali dailies on Thursday to try to clear the confusion explaining that the parties that have a seat in Parliament must use one symbol and the EC needed to use two of the same symbols in the seventh column to differentiate one ward committee candidate from the other.

The parties that have no seat in Parliament and independents have to use different symbols for each of their candidates. So there is only one symbol in the seventh column for their candidates. So voters will have to stamp just once in the seventh column although there are two election symbols.

The EC says it has been using the mass and social media to educate voters, but at least for Kathmandu Valley voters may feel like they are giving a multiple choice exam when they vote on Sunday.
A survey is all 32 wards of Kathmandu Metropolitan City last week by the mobile polling group Rosco Logic found that there is considerable enthusiasm for local polls, but also a lack of knowledge about locations of polling booths and how to use ballot papers. The results showed a warning lack of interest among young people 18-25, more than three-fourths of whom said they would not vote. However, 65 percent of the 394 respondents in the sample group surveyed through mobile phones said they would vote because it was important in a democracy.

Most respondents didn’t know or don’t care about their party preferences. But Kathmandu being a traditional Nepali Congress stronghold, it was not surprising that 61 percent of those who would vote said they supported Nepal Communist Party and the CPN UML. The UML and Maoists trailed behind, while Blackhearts showed a small dip. The newly-formed Sary Party of Rabindra Mishra and Sabarmab Shringar’s New Force did not reign in this mobile phone survey.

1. What are your priority issues in Kathmandu?

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2. Will you vote or not? (All respondents)

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<th>Don't know</th>
<th>Might not vote</th>
<th>Not vote</th>
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3. Disaggregated data on voting by age group.

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<th>Might vote</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
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<th>Not vote</th>
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<td>10.00%</td>
<td>10.00%</td>
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4. Disaggregated data on voting by gender.

<table>
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<th>Might vote</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
<th>Might not vote</th>
<th>Not vote</th>
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<td>15.00%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td>5.00%</td>
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Methodology

Rosco Logic used a digital tool called REMO (Research and Marketing) software to work with a network of enumerators called Sukamatra to collect data from the field rapidly through mobile phones. The data was then analyzed to produce voting patterns. The method was used to conduct an opinion poll after the 2013 constituent assembly elections.

The questionnaires measured qualitative responses for perception and potential voting patterns among respondents. The questionnaire does not contain any questions that have direct or indirect impact on the outcome of elections, favour certain parties or persons or try to create public opinion.

Rosco Logic

Complete survey results: http://roscologic.com/
Art exhibition, Take an afternoon stroll to visit Augustblock by German artist Ralf A. Klometer, created from 2005-2017 in Kathmandu. 11 May, 4-6 p.m onwards, Sangisso museum, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu, Kathmandu. (01) 5178160.

Girls futsal, Register your team for the first girl power futsal tournament, organized by The Girls Power. 20 May, 8 a.m to 6 p.m, Bhaktapur Durbar Square, Bhaktapur. Entry fee Rs. 5,000, (01) 4009653.

Poetry with Alok, Join a night of poetry, comedy and performance with gender non-conforming writer and entertainer, Alok Vaid-Menon. 22 May, 6 p.m onwards, Nepal Tourism Board, Prasharani Marg, Kathmandu. Rs 500. warriorwomyn@gmail.com

Reflections auction, Bid to grab the best artwork on the last day of the exhibition, Reflections 20-4-2015. The 10 works of art to be auctioned are based on stories of people affected by the 2015 earthquake. 12 May, 10 a.m to 5 p.m, Nepal Art Council, Babori Market, Basantapur. (01) 4073780.

Vertical University, Earth Day Crowd Box Roadtrip Challenge KTM-17 has raised Rs 46,290 so far. Competition closes 18 May and needs to reach a target, setting up the world’s first 8,000km Vertical University to protect biodiversity in eastern Nepal. A seed bank of tropical trees, an art therapy education centre in Nax Tajpur, and support for 10 youth fellows and 100 farmers to proceed. https://www.crowdrise.com/ktk-belt-roadmap2017

Click away, Have your photography skills with a 10-day workshop for beginners. Learn from professional artists and photographers. 6 to 15 May, 7 a.m to 4 p.m, Annapurna Kesari Hotel, Chitwan. (01) 4327777.

Bird counting, Make a day out of bird watching and be part of the Urban-Rural Bird Count Phase II, organized by Bird Conservation Nepal. Registration required by 10 May. (01) 4417005, 4425713

Open mic, Grab the mic and sing your heart out at the issue of Music every Tuesday. House of Music, Itahari. 9861073172.

Metal night, Book your tickets to enjoy the metal party. 29 July, 7 to 11 p.m. Purple Haze Rock Bar, Itahari. Tickets Rs 150 (pre sale), Rs 400 (door). 9842926124

Jazz on the rooftop, Enjoy your weekend to the beats of jazz with Maria Iqurada and Mahesh Tankuwar. 21 May, 7 p.m onwards, Alhambra Francais de Rhythmic Art, Patan. Price Rs 400, (01) 4503337.

Musical arts, Enjoy live music by Moma Discus and Lazy volle and enjoy the display of artwork by urban artists from Nepal. 79 May, 6 to 10 p.m, Friends Restaurant, Itahari. (01) 4378606.

Hello Café, “Brisk” a wide range of Korean and Japanese snacks. Don’t forget to try the Valley’s best Chef’s Special Soju. (01) 4916178.

Lahkpa’s Chulo, Nepal dal bhar, Newari khuna, Swiss Harris, Italian pasta, and Thai green curry - take your pick. (01) 5547866

Fresh Cup, This unique culture café is the place to go for excellent Americanos and macchiatos. Try their grilled chicken sandwich, among other selections. Komali, Kathmandu. (01) 4428640.

Wunjala Moskva, Treat your palate to Newari and Russian dishes in the lush garden with ancient trees and trickling streams. Maneil. (01) 4472726

Acoustic Friday, Catch Trist playing great acoustic music and enjoy a pick of free出租车. 12 May, 7 p.m to 11 p.m, Jorge rested Bar, Pashupatinath. (01) 4378609.

GETAWAY

Buddha Maya Gardens Hotel, Add value to your travel in Lumbini with a stay at possibly the best hotel in the area. Lumbini. (071) 5902022, 9861031339. info@byn.com

Patalehan Vineyard Resort, 16 km west of Kathmandu city, the resort is a perfect place to spend your weekends with food and wine. It offers astounding views of the sunsets and mountains. Chitoopan Bindhyangarh Road. (01) 4916077.

Ramiah Retreat, Situated at the other end of Phewa Lake and nestled inside the Ramiah 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, Pharping. (01) 567186.

Famous Farm, Wake up to the sounds of chirping birds and a fresh morning coffee awaiting in the lawn hill. Nawalok, (01) 4040426, nylunar@heritage.com

Shivapuri Cottage, Escape the pressures of Kathmandu and enjoy peace, tranquility, good food, and fresh air. Budhanilkantha. 9841779187.
Silver linings

Radheshyam Adhikari in Kathmandu, 8 May

The year has brought a silver lining in the form of local elections. Public opinion is firmly in support of defending the role of the judiciary. Voters have put political parties on notice. This is no longer the prerogative of the elite, but the concern of the wider citizenry, which is a good thing for democracy.

Local elections are taking place because the people want them. Nepal has long felt the absence of local public services and development both suffered. The basic level of democracy, which allows people access to government, did not exist for 15 years. Unselected bureaucrats and local movers and shakers monopolised decision-making. There is great anticipation about the elections.

The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court was ambushed guerrilla style by an impeachment motion in Parliament. It became an issue that directly affected ordinary Nepal, one that was not confined to the halls of Parliament. Those behind the impeachment move should have known that it was the proper thing to do, not just to Parliament but to the people, who want answers. The proponents are becoming defensive, and civil society has united against the move. This proves that Nepali democracy has become more resilient. Democracy gains strength after facing threats like these. Debate on the doctrine of the separation of powers is no longer confined to experts of constitutional law, but is held in households across the country. When the people stand up to support the pulse of an independent judiciary, it becomes stronger. The puts added responsibility on the shoulders of all those who play a role in the judiciary. There have been many cases in the past where mistakes have been made, but there is no alternative to an independent and free judiciary that is the message that has spread across the country in the aftermath of the impeachment motion.

The parties are busy campaigning, but also forging alliances across party lines. It remains to be seen how voters will take this. However, if it indicates that there is now more tolerance in politics then it must be seen as a good thing. Established parties have another challenge from new groups like the Jhala Party and Biplav Keshab. We will see how well they do at the ballot box, but the very fact that they can affect the elections will prove that they are needed.

If it is true that through the Internet and social media younger citizens are being attracted to vote, this can only provide more energy to our democracy. All these encouraging trends are positive and prove that there is a silver lining to our democracy.

New Korean prez in Nepal

South Korea’s newly-elected president Moon Jae-in volunteered to provide relief to earthquake survivors in Nepal’s Nuwakot district and went on a trek to the Langtang Valley last year. Moon helped in the reconstruction of Arukhara Secondary School in Belkot, joining others to carry bricks and material for repair work. He also provided science equipment to the school.

“He is a very simple and humble man, and mixed well with the local people,” recalls Bhakta Ram Lamichhane, who is affiliated to labour unions assisting Nepali workers in Korea and helped organise the trip for Moon. He himself spent three years working in Korea.

The trek to Langtang was along trails that had not yet been repaired after landslides triggered by the earthquake, and Moon joined other Korean and Nepali colleagues to remove rocks and clear the trail. “I was surprised that a person who was to become the president of his country was so friendly and generous,” Lamichhane said.

Moon represented the Democratic Party and got 41.08 per cent of the votes when results were announced on Tuesday, defeating his nearest rival Hwang Kyo- Pyo, who got 24.3 per cent. Moon also contested elections in 2012, but was defeated. He has been sensitive to the needs of migrant workers in Korea.

Moon said he came to Nepal and Bhutan to “seek happiness and peace,” and spent two weeks in Nuwakot and Rasuwa trekking to the village in Langtang buried by an avalanche in 2015 and to Gesersikunda Lake. But he also spent time with Nepali returnees from Korea to inquire about their well-being.
I am the first to admit that I watch everything: aside from the overly masculine dude-oriented comedies, I can usually stomach almost every genre. That being said, this year’s XXX: Return of Xander Cage, the third instalment of a deeply silly, but kind of enjoyable franchise, was too much even for my lowered expectations.

Part of the reason why the XXX franchise has done so well is the inexplicable charisma of Vin Diesel, the extraordinary stage name of 49-year-old American Mark Sinclair, who has made his name on the Fast & Furious list in order of fan franchises. Unfortunately, even Diesel’s significant screen presence cannot save this ridiculously trite film, which attempts to emulate the elements that have made The Fast and the Furious films so successful, namely the jaw-dropping, frankly unbelievable, but highly entertaining action sequences, the multiculturalism, the strong gender equality in casting, and a realistic, unabashedly tongue-in-cheek sense of humour, all tied together by Diesel’s leading character.

Trained as a theatre actor from a young age, Diesel is much more talented than one might guess from his chosen niche as macho action hero, and it is painful to see this very likeable protagonist flounder in such an ill written, sloppily directed film. Unfortunately The Return of Xander Cage has made an awful lot of money at the box office, all but guaranteeing another instalment, and one can only hope that it somehow manages to reiterate in a more creative, less insulting manner. The plot of the film is so silly it is not worth a summary, yet the film boasts an astonishing cast of international renown, including Toni Collette and Donnie Yen, and marks the debut in Hollywood of the lovely, talented Hollywood star Deepika Padukone: one cannot help but feel sorry for her in a role that does very little justice to her acting abilities, ogles her physical beauty and, frankly, does not bore well for her future in English language films.

I’m not saying you cannot enjoy this new XXX film. I’m just warning you that stepping into this interminable film (yes, it is boring) will guarantee you stupid jokes, a clichéd plot, hackneyed action scenes, banal bad girls and not even a single surprise. With The Fast and the Furious films as an example of what to do, XXX is an example of what not to do, ever.

You will be seeing more of Diesel as Xander Cage, a $356 million box office gross assures us that. But when we struggle to be able to find and watch films like Hidden Figures and Arrival (both of which were nominated for Best Picture this year) it is always a bit of a shame when our cinemas can only make money while carrying the likes of Xander Cage’s ignominious return.
It’s party time on the Internet ...

but still doubtful if the wave of digital campaigning in this local election will translate into votes

SONIA AWALE

An 8-second video on Instagram shows a middle-aged female voter approaching immobile-caged Blickhein Nepali candidate for Kalmthana mayoral, 71-year-old Raju Darshana, on a road terrace overlooking Durbar Square and says, “I came all the way here looking for you.” Darshana returns a shy smile and says, “Thank you.”

Sajha Party

Chief Rabindra Mishra starts a 45-minute video on Facebook with his party’s candidate Kotha Thapa and Rimjhum Yadav by noting how he is conducting a “slightly different” interview than when he was a journalist for BBC Nepal. Mishra’s public Facebook account has nearly 850,000 followers, while his party’s page has only 65,000.

YouTube

 Folk duo Raju Parsang and Priya Bhakta perform a party election music video on YouTube that destroys 500,000 views within a week of being posted. The lyrics: “Vote for UML, the people’s party that neverketerangan to unplug and fill the blockade.” There is also flog waving and unabashed nationalism.

The RPP

Kamal Thapa has over 361,000 followers on Twitter and pins a tweet of a sick animated video entitled “be the RPP, be his party and be the one to vote in local elections. In other posts, Thapa addresses strong in his home district of Malaiwara and censures the RPP’s Magh candidate for Kathmandu.

Health Minister Gagan Thapa is not standing for local elections, but does a live discussion on Periscope on “Nepalbok Kathmandu.” It can be played back on his Facebook page, including Thapa’s no-show at the plug for his own Nepali Congress party’s candidate for mayoral, Ramji Raj Joshi, extolling his commitment to improve Kathmandu’s environment.

With limited time to campaign in two-phased local elections, Nepal’s politicial parties are finding their candidates for village and municipal councils on social networks like never before. The first local elections in 1999 starts Sunday and will include nearly 8 million youthful first-time voters. Even those who have never voted in local polls are about 38. The new parties, especially, believe they can reach potential voters through smart phones rather than street rallies.

Digital native start-up, like Blickhein Nepali, Sajha Party and New Force, are making full use of digital platforms to spread their good governance messages and take support away from the established parties.

Although the 2013 constituent assembly elections led to the first of Nepal’s digital-era. Sunday’s contest is the first time “social” has been used extensively. Half of Nepal’s have internet access, 7 million are on Facebook, and most are logging on through mobile phones. Even the strongest political leaders have realized they also need a digital podium.

“One of our best selling points is the innovative way in which we present ourselves in social media,” says Anu

Thapa, CEO of Blickhein Nepali. The young party is vigorously promoting Raju Darshana on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and attracting thousands of views to live interactive interviews and other events. The party’s core has an animated video, with a rap soundtrack, which fabricates against corruption, nepotism and urban taxman, promoting that Blickhein’s young mayor will usher in a new era of clean and efficient Kathmandu.

However, it is not clear if the message works, even with younger voters in the capital. At 21, Avva Adhikari is a media studies student at Kathmandu University and the same age as Darshana. But he is not completely convinced that the candidate has the maturity or experience to be mayor, adding “it don’t think the rap works with young voters. It is the wrong genre. Colloquial folk songs are much more effective.”

As an established party that traditionally used celebrity musicians at campaign rallies, the UML does just that. It has released music videos of folk duets by well-known singers, replacing colloquial lyrics with rousing nationalism and an anti-nepotism message.

Nepal’s No.1 Honey

The established parties are cautious on the. The Hindu-eight RPP has set up a nine-member social media team that has posted promotional messages and two election videos, and features celebrity members like Meena Thapa and Karmal. The RPP has not released any video or photos, and the NC appears to mistakenly think that streaming central committee members giving speeches will somehow appeal to young voters.

Corporate CEO and social media critic Ashish Thakuri uses online polls hinder to encourage young candidates like Darshana, and says the new parties have been much smarter in exploiting the Internet to enhance their credibility as well as win votes. The new generation is looking for alternatives to the old party system and conditions with a new way of doing politics. They will certainly make a dent,” he argues.

But candidates have found the Internet is a double-edged sword. For every post supporting them, there are many more rude responses from flames and trolls. For example, a YouTube video indicating Rabindra Mishra of Sajha has got far more views than his official promo video. Being a young woman, Darshana is trollingly reflected, reflecting the more sexist side of social media globally. It is also doubtful how effective Internet campaigning can be compared to old-fashioned mass meetings, street rallies and door-to-door tech pressing. Nepali has one of the highest digital engagements in the world. But we have seen it’s not as easy to dissuade people from party loyalty in elections,” says media columnist Sharma Adhikari.

Social media expert Ujjwala Acharya doubts that online campaigning alone will convert into votes, but may do so in future by extending media to its full potential, rather than using it to badmouth rivals.

Her conclusion: “Most social media followers of political parties are already old voters. The real question is if they can influence people outside their circle.”

nepaltimes.com

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TRIAL AND ERROR DEMOCRACY

Nepal is experimenting with radical decentralisation in local elections, and does not have the luxury of failing

OM ASTHA RAI

When new mayors and village council chiefs assume office after the first round of elections on 14 May, they will confront a constituency with very high expectations of good governance and development.

These are the first elections to local councils since 1997, and people are desperately waiting for their chosen representatives to make up for two lost decades. But newly-elected ward, village and municipal council members and mayors will face multiple challenges trying to solve long-neglected problems. Voters will be impatient, and the parties may not be able to make a difference right away.

To start with, most new village and municipal councils will not even have desks and chairs. They will have to work out of what used to be VDC buildings, which will have to be converted into ward offices.

"The first round of elections is taking place where earthquake survivors are living in temporary shelters," says Krishna Prasad Sapkota, ex-president of the Association of District Development Committees Nepal. "And in most of these villages, the newly-elected local council chiefs will also have to work out of temporary shelters."

The 744 new municipal and village councils will have many more powers and will need at least 70 staff each, up from the present 16. The Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development is working to transfer former VDC and DDC staff to the new local councils, but this is not going to happen even by the time the next round of local elections are held on 14 June.

Daman Rai of the Association of VDC Secretaries says most councils will need more than 70 employees: "If a village council is to perform all its tasks, it needs at least 150 employees, so our new representatives will have neither proper offices nor sufficient staff to deliver services." The Constitution has given municipal and village councils 22 exclusive rights to draft their own laws, hear legal cases, collect taxes and issue licenses for new schools and radio stations. Former municipalities and VDCs were local administrative units, the new units will be real local governments with the powers of the executive, legislative and judiciary rolled into one. "Greater responsibilities mean greater challenges," says Ghanashyam Khatiwada of the National Association of VDCs. "If newly-elected representatives are not trained to understand their roles and perform their duties, they will be lost."

These logistic shortcomings, however, pale in comparison to the challenges newly-elected local bodies will face from the feudal hierarchies within their own parties, who will want to centralise decision-making.

"The political parties that are at the centre are not willing

Electing for a better

A village in Kavre is using Sunday’s election to make up for two lost decades of development

17 YEARS APART: Bibhak Neparkar speaking at the inauguration of a microhydro plant at Gudhup Rural municipality in Kavre in 2000 (left) and addressing a campaign rally on Monday in Parbati Municipality, where he is standing for mayor.
KUNDA DIXIT

The bucolic village of Kushadevi offers vivid proof of how grassroots democracy can unleash development, and how the prolonged absence of elected local officials can undermine it.

Located just over the eastern rim of the Kathmandu Valley, the village has in the past decades emerged as a major source of vegetables, dairy products and manpower for the capital city. Since 1990, Kunve has become a success story for community forestry and a model for how accountability through elections can lift living standards in Nepal’s villages.

“We lost the last 16 years after our VDC councils were dismantled, and what was left was destroyed by the Maoists. We have started rebuilding democracy again from the grassroots,” says Bhim Neupane, who was elected in 1992 and 1997 to lead the Kushadevi Village Development Council and is now standing for mayor.

This time, Kushadevi has been merged with Panauti Municipality and 10 other surrounding rural VDCs. The issues are also different, says Neupane: while many of his constituents are still farmers, there is a growing urban middle class.

The council is being elected to is also much more powerful: it can make local laws, raise taxes and decide on projects.

One rainy morning this week, with just days to go before elections, Neupane was campaigning door-to-door, meeting voters, many of whom he knew by name. Even though he had to step down when the government of Prime Minister Deuba counselled scheduled local elections in 2002, like many VDC members across Nepal, Neupane did not stop serving his constituents: his electorate looked up to him as if he was still their leader.

“Just look at them: there is so much enthusiasm for this election. That is because they know how far development was pushed back because of the absence of elected officials, and how our rivers and mountains were shafted by the mining mafia,” Neupane says.

Neupane’s UML is riding a nationalist wave from his party’s successful opposition to the Indian blockade during KP Oli’s prime ministership: last year, but many locals say the development agenda is much more important to them.

“We suffered a lot during the blockade, but now with local elections we are looking forward to making up for lost time. It doesn’t matter which party the candidate is from, what we are looking for are honest leaders who can fulfil their promises,” says Laxman Humaipali from Kushadevi, who works in a school in Kathmandu.

Seventeen years ago, the newly re-elected Neupane was interviewed by this newspaper while inaugurating a micro-hydro project in a remote ward: a day’s walk south of Kushadevi. He said: “People are now aware, they are able to plan and work together to improve their living standards.”

But soon, the Maoists demolished Nepal’s fugitive grassroots democracy, which was beginning to deliver basic services to the people. In Kushadevi itself, Neupane’s comrade Krishna Sapkota was beheaded by the Maoists and his decapitated body displayed in the village square to terrify locals. The Maoists also looted the VDC building, which became a health post and a school support unit.

Throughout it all, despite threats, Neupane remained in his village.

In his campaign speeches, Neupane doesn’t make wild promises of railway lines or sugar factories. He promises to continue where he left off to create jobs in tourism and the service industry, set up health posts and provide free checkups every six months for his constituents.

Krishna Prasad Sapkota was the elected chair of Kushadevi VDC when Neupane was heading Kushadevi VDC in 2000. The two worked well together and both were determined to make democracy work. When the VDCs were dismantled, Sapkota was elected to become MP. He now fears that there is a danger of local elections being hijacked by the mining mafia that has grown rich and powerful in the past 20 years (see Guest Editorial, page 2).

“Graffiti corruption is now so deeply entrenched that this malady may undermine accountability in the newly elected local government council,” says Sapkota. Those who plundered local resources without having to answer to the public are now trying to trick people to repeat the same.

As for the election, Sapkota says he is uncertain.

“This is the beauty of democracy: people now know exactly what is going on and they can vote for the people who they think are most qualified to better their lives.”

future
Bad Ass

It is now finally becoming clear to The Ass why we have such a long and glorious history as an independent nation state never colonized by a western power. We are currently colonized by a southern power, and Kathmandu celebrates an entire chunk of the country, but that’s another story. The long and short of it is that every prospective investor since Alexander the Great took one look at Nepal’s formidable terrain, our happy-go-lucky drukaris, wandering people, and our national side-dish of perpetual astrology, and they concluded we were unapproachable and left us alone. “Hope, ain’t going there,” Genghis Khan is reported to have said in a moment of resignation.

We know from North Korea and Iran that one satellite shoot is all it takes to impose our international standing. China’s ability to bring “plutonium enrichment without further ado” as our MPs call it. We can start with the newly-researched U2 spies. Next, we’ll set our sights on GOW’s labs, and we’ll make China’s ICBMs. We’ll start by building our own ICBM. We’ll build an ICBM that can also shoot down other ICBMs. This is the only way we can be taken seriously.

Our leaders must learn from the example of Thapa whose reign as deputy prime minister and foreign minister was marked by conciliation and integrity. We need more people like Brinda Deo who also reigns as deputy prime minister and immediately reaps the gloominess. This is the kind of quick decision-making we need if we are to be admitted into the EU.

We are serious about being a pariah nation and remaining one. We can’t just punch someone around anymore. We are not the only one in the room anymore. We have to go and stand up for ourselves. We have to be taken seriously. We have to be taken seriously.

The Ass