At a time when Nepal is getting its 10th prime minister in ten years, the capital is preparing to welcome its first mayor in 15 years.

With nearly all the 170,000 votes counted as we went to press Thursday evening, Bidhya Sundar Shukla of UML was leading by a 14,600 margin. Shakyas and his NC counterpart in Palan, Chhiring Malaraj, have their work cut out in the congested, polluted, chaotic twin citis.

The country’s politics is not less chaotic. The NC’s Shri Babadur Debub is due to replace Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal who resigned on Wednesday and become PM for the fourth time. The country’s new Prime Minister and the capital’s new Mayor will have to work hard together to fix the mess Nepal and Kathmandu (cities) are in.

Since the last local elections in 1997, Kathmandu Valley’s population has doubled to 3.5 million. Shakyas’s priority will be to manage public transport, enforce zoning and building codes, control pollution, clean up the Bagmati, manage sewage and water supply... it is a long list.

Debub’s previous three tenures as Prime Minister were during the Maoist war, and he is blamed for the development vacuum after cancelling local elections in 2002. He now has to conduct the second phase of local elections by convincing Tani-based parties to take part, and modify the UML. He then needs to hold provincial and parliamentary elections before January 2018.

Debub is in a hurry to take over, but it will take him at least two weeks to cobble together a new government — and that may even be after the first phase on 14 June.

Maoist spokesperson Pempha Bhusal told us: “Our party wants to give a chance to new faces, but some ministers who have performed exceptionally well may get to stay.” It may be the same story to the NC.

Om Astha Rai

FEMININE FEDERAL REPUBLIC

EDITORIAL

MADAM MAYOR

GUEST EDITORIAL

BY KANTIKI SEJWAL

The new Mayor of Kathmandu

PAGE 2

DOUBLE AFFIRMATION

BY OM ASTHA RAI

Go online for interactive map and video of women winning first phase of local elections

nepalitimes.com
FEDERAL FEMININE REPUBLIC OF NEPAL

Nepal is still a patriarchal. Girls are discriminated against within their families, communities and society. Men from privileged castes dominate decision-making, they are dominant and unaccountably represented in the cabinet, the executive branch, the civil service and also in senior positions in the private sector. Men sit where it matters.

Yet, there are winds of change blowing across Nepal’s gender landscape. Nepal’s President, Speaker of Parliament and Chief Justice are all women, and nearly a third of Parliament is female. And now, the feminisation of Nepali politics is trickling down to the grassroots through new constitutionally mandated quotas for women candidates in local elections.

With 50% of the votes counted from the 14 May elections as we go to press, we have record numbers of 6.1% of the mayors and 63% of the vice-mayors in races to municipal councils. Women also won 8% of village council chairs and 26% vice-chairs, and 2,998 of ward memberships. The vice-mayors in all five municipalities cities where ballot papers are still being counted are sure to be women as well.

Compared to the total number of male candidates this may not seem like much, but it represents a revolution in the way many new villages, municipalities and cities will be governed from now on. As our report on page 14-15 shows, this election is putting Dalit women not only in just policy-making positions, but also making them responsible for implementation. Nowhere else in Asia has this gender shift in governance been as dynamic, and it is also the most inclusive yet of the inclusiveness promised in the new constitution.

Let’s zoom in on the Hupsekot Village of Narayangadh district. Kantiya Paudel of the NC became the first village council chair to be elected in last week’s election. But it didn’t end there. The vice-chair is also a woman: Kopila Malla of the UML. By voting women from two different parties to the highest offices in their village council, the people of Hupsekot have demonstrated their confidence in female leadership.

Even conservative Jumla, which is still steeped in patriarchal values, made history last week by elected social activist Kantiya Sejwal of the NC as the country’s first female mayor. After the votes were counted it was another woman, Aparna Devi Neupane, of Maoist Centre who was elected deputy mayor in Jumla.

As more results come in, more women are being added to decision-making positions at the local level. There are twice as many candidates in the second phase of local elections in 14 June, and this trend is expected to continue.

All this has been made possible by the provision that every new constitution mandating that every Ward Council must have a woman and a Dalit member. Parties were required to field a woman candidate in either the head or deputy in metropolitan, municipal and village councils. Yet, there are places like Jumla and Hupsekot where both the head and deputy are both female. Some gender rights activists had complained before the polls that the female and Dalit quotas were ‘tokenism’. But the new Constitution is turning out to be a spectacular surprise — signaling a major shift in gender power balance in Nepal’s political history.

GUEST EDITORIAL
KANTIKA SEJWAL

I was just 14 when they got married. I had my first baby one year later and dropped out of school. I had always dreamed of going to college, but wasn’t able to get up in time. I repeated school and passed the SC exams when my husband, Madam Mayor, was just in Kathmandu, for the first time in the 1990 Democracy Movement. My husband was freed but became even more active in politics, running as a Jana Danu President of the SC. He was one of the leaders in the 1990s, leading an organization that was in line with the law.

The people of Jumla know me as a hardworking single woman committed to transforming the image of Jumla. They voted for me because of these little things: I have already registered in a MIT as Mayor of Chaurung Municipality in my first election in 2013, it is a small town in the small town that I’m in it to turn it into a clean and green city with adequate drinking water supply. I also work on electricity and drainage issues. People in Kathmandu are happy to get it at last.
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A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER
From royal to republic
Nepal sets an example in smoothly transitioning from monarchy to republic

SHREJANA SHRESTHA

W hen historians look back at the beginning of the end of Nepal’s monarchy, they probably will not dwell long on a newly-elected Constituent Assembly declaring Nepal a republic in 2008, but on the night of 1 June 2001.

Sixteen years ago, this week, as the country was buffeted by chronic instability and a spreading Maoist war, a routine clan dinner at the Narayanthan Palace in Kathmandu turned into a gruesome massacre of monarchs unprecedented, in world history.

Piecemeal eye-witness information and cross-checking with doctors at the Army Hospital and other sources, this newspaper has followed the saga to maintain that Crown Prince Dipendra shot his father King Birendra, his mother Queen Ashwarya, his uncle Prince Dhurbuddha, his brother, sister, four other royals and finally himself (dying at left in family portrait in 1987, right).

Even though he lay in a coma for four days, and as the rest of his family was taken in cremation processions through a capital in curfew, Dipendra was declared king. After Dipendra died, Gyanendra was crowned, making him the third king of Nepal in 15 days.

The royal massacre contributed to the Maoists deciding on their goal to abolish the monarchy, and within five months took the war directly to the Royal Nepal Army. However, the factor that was almost as important in leading to the abolition of the monarchy was King Gyanendra’s attempt to turn the clock back on democracy.

Although Gyanendra’s transition from monarchy to republic was civilised compared to other countries which have executed deposed monarchs, ransacked the palace or driven them into exile. The state also exercised restraint while detaining the king and abolishing a 250-year-old institution.

However, the years since the abolition of the monarchy saw the country mired in a deadlock over the constitution, rules openly flouting the rule of law, chronic political turmoil and economic stagnation. There is such great public disillusionment about the four-party cartel that runs this country that some sections have started openly speaking about a return to the relative stability of the monarchy years.

They argue that republicanism, secularism and federalism were never the agenda of the 2006 people’s movement, and were foisted on Nepal by outside forces through proxies in the Maoist party.

One of them is former Army Chief Rukmanraj Katwal whose sacking by Pushpa Kamal Dahal led to his resignation as prime minister in 2009. Katwal says the abolition of the monarchy was not done through a democratic process.

“If we are to follow the democratic practice as laid down by B P Koirala, the political parties should have first asked the people if they really wanted to get rid of the monarchy. The end of monarchy was an impulsive decision of the political parties,” Katwal told us.

The former army chief credits King Gyanendra for the smooth transition from monarchy to republic because he avoided a direct confrontation by vacating the palace peacefully immediately after the CA’s decision in 2008. But the general noted: “It would have been better if he had exhibited the same statesmanship while he was king.”

The political parties also showed accommodation, allowing the royal family to reside in Narayanthan Palace, the Queen Mother to stay in a section of Narayanthan Palace and in Bhimsen. Gyanendra himself has lived low in the past nine years, shuns interviews, and appears only occasionally in public. However, from time to time, he has made royal-sounding pronouncements that hint at impatience with political parties ignoring the people’s welfare.

Past public opinion polls in this paper have shown that Gyanendra’s popularity is still very low, there is a slight increase in support for a restoration of monarchy, but there has been consistently high backing for rolling back secularism from the constitution.

Political scientist Hari Sharma says Nepal’s monarchy has been contentious ever since the 1950s, and the people have always opposed dictatorial monarchs. He added: “The transition from monarchy to republic in Nepal was smooth unlike other countries because the deposition of the King had political mandate. Also, the social root of monarchy had been shallow and weak, and the institution alienated from larger social discourse.”

Royal Family Tree

- KILLED IN THE MASSACRE
- SURVIVORS

[Diagram of the royal family tree showing generations and relationships]
Royal assets

After the end of the conflict in 2006, Nepal became a kind of ‘republik monarchy’. The country was still nominally a monarchy, but had an interim government in which former guerrillas were ministers. The legislature ordered King Gyanendra Shah to submit property details in a move that was the beginning of the process of nationalisation of assets belonging to King Birendra and his family which had been transferred to Gyanendra after the royal massacre of 2001.

An autonomous body called the Nepal Trust was set up a year later to oversee the process. Gyanendra refused to submit his property details, and even a decade after abdication of the monarchy and 16 years after the royal massacre, the office is still trying to piece together details of royal property and assets.

The Nepal Trust has taken possession of 21,000 properties of royal property across the country, but very little liquid assets have been identified. (Details online.)

The Trust has not been able to obtain any information on the assets in foreign banks belonging to Birendra’s family.

Lokh Bahadur Karki of Nepal Trust Office admits there could be a lot more property and assets that belonged to King Birendra and his family that are in the names of others.

“We are still trying to find out what they owned, we are not convinced that this is all they had,” says Karki. The Trust recently uncovered 40 royalties of land owned by former royal family members in Gokarneshwor Municipality in Kathmandu and is preparing to transfer ownership.

The Trust is also eyeing the Narayanpur Palace even though the government had decided to allow Gyanendra to use the property as a country home after they vacated Narayanhiti in 2008.

According to the law, the Trust can confiscate any property belonging to King Birendra, Queen Ashwarya and their sons Dipendra and Nirajun if it is found that they were transferred to King Gyanendra after the royal massacre.

Ran Bahadur Kukel, who worked at the Narayanhiti Palace for more than 10 years, admits that the people find it hard to believe that Birendra’s family only owned what has so far been uncovered.

Property taken over by the Trust includes Gokarna Forest Resort, Standard Chartered Bank in Lalitpur, Kathmandu Business Complex, Nepal Red Cross building in Thahchal, Dipalo Durbar in Bhaktapur, and Ratta Mandir in Pokhara. The Trust has also collected Rs 401 million revenue from the leased property.

Although the Trust is mandated to use the money for welfare of underprivileged families, the money is just sitting in the bank. Trust officials say that they are unable to allocate it because of the lack of proper guidelines on where to spend it.

Shreejana Shrestha

BIZ BRIEFS

Bleak report

The World Bank’s Country Economic Memorandum (CEM) on Nepal titled Climbing Higher: Toward a Middle Income Nepal says that despite a rapid reduction in the poverty, there is an urgent need to boost economic growth. If this trend continues, Nepal will not meet the goal of graduating to middle income country status by 2030. (Full report online.)

Accelerating business

Enterprise – Nepal Business Accelerator Program is calling for applications from entrepreneurs for the third batch on growth-stage ventures. The program will incorporate 10 teams and is scheduled to begin on 1 August. www.enterprise.com.np

Yeti pushes SDGs

Yeti Airlines and the United Nations have agreed to promote global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to raise awareness on key poverty, improve wellbeing and protect the environment. Yeti’s new aircraft as well boarding passes and other literature will carry the SDG goals on climate change, poverty reduction and gender equality.

Sporty Turkish

Turkish Airlines Euroleague Final Four 2017 concluded this week with Ferencvarosi emerging victorious over Olympiacos Piraeus with 24 basketball teams taking part in the final in Istanbul. 18th-21st May. Turkish Airlines is also sponsoring the ENGAGE Empowering League premier women’s basketball competition in Nepal 27 May-1 July.

Hyundai exchange

Ludhiana, Intercontinental conducted a three-day Hyundai Exchange program held in showrooms in Ludhiana, Bathinda, Gurdaspur and Amritsar with special discounts. One lucky winner from each showroom will receive Cash for Cool ‘I smartphone with ‘Test Drive and Win’
Landing hard in Meghauri

The Twin Otter lurched, and a blur of elephants and people flashed past the left wing

The two pilots were their Royal Nepal Airlines uniformed, but from my vantage point in the front seat of the Twin Otter it never occurred to me to notice that both were only qualified as co-pilots. Good old RNAAC—two halves make a whole.

As we descended to Meghauri, my mind was on theeward flight to meet Himalayan-ho Eric Spittal and sweep his group down from Pokhara to Chitwan—such an iconic mountaineer deserved special treatment and Alp Beach, the bearded American head of Mountain Travel, had asked me to oblige. The clear weather and pleasant chill in the November air were a reminder of winter to come.

The white peaks of Himalchuli and Manaslu soared on the northern skyline as we started losing height over the lowland forests. Despite being a dusty dirt airfield, Meghauri is longer and wider than is needed for the nifty 18-seater Twin Otter. The airstrip had been carved out of the jungle in 1965 for one of the last great tiger hunts to entertain Queen Elizabeth II, and had loads of space.

I had never been a nervous flyer, but something felt wrong when the aircraft wheels bounced hard on the ground, then disturbingly lifted again and again, on and on, bouncing higher and dropping down the long runway for what seemed ages as we increasingly lost control. The cockpit stall signal shrieked, the small aircraft shuddered and lurched, and a blur of elephants and people flashed past the left wing. A sharp jolt threw me sideways into the aisle, a heavy crunch brought us to a halt.

I noticed the pilots were dazed and bleeding. We were at a strange angle, my seat belt strained, and I had to retrieve my two tortoiseshell hair combs from under the seat. “Is everyone all right?” I called out, attempting to professional calm. The turbaned tour leader was asked for and speechless.

As we tumbled out of the rear door, I still thought this had just been a bad landing. But the battered plane was well off the main runway and poised on the edge of a jagged crater gouged out by the monsoon. “Lucky we didn’t go into that,” I muttered to Chuck who had hurried over, clad in khaki shirt, shorts and uncharacteristic agitation. “You did,” he drawled, “you went right into it, spun around, and came out up the other side!”

Only then did I notice that the plane’s nose was smashed in, its undercarriage tipped off and one wing drooped sadly. Chuck briefed the incoming group then sent them off on the two-hour elephant safari through the park to Tiger Tops lodge, just as through the crash had never happened.

The afternoon was frenetic, rushing for help, getting the outgoing guests onto divertered flights and the injured to hospital in army helicopters. No one was badly hurt. One of the half captains had broken a leg. The rogue aircraft had hit two people on the ground who kept the dog and cattle off the runway—Prem Bahadur was struck on the back of his head and Jam Singh was run over having thrown himself into a ditch. Everyone was shaken as the plane had hurtled straight towards the rustic terminal until the pilots managed at the last minute to put power into one engine to avoid them.

It was some weeks later that the official flight assessor was sent by the Maritime Canada to investigate the incident. Wonderfully named Mr Popov, he confirmed that the Twin Otter had “balked” on landing. Only the grass airstrip had prevented an explosion on impact, killing us all.

By the time I flew back to Kathmandu later that afternoon with Captain Paul Wick in his P49, the adrenaline had dissipated. The light was fading on the hills, and I was beginning to fade myself. Walking straight through the crowds at the airport, I arrived shaky and weak-kneed into the cool of Al’s high-collared office.

“I was told you were dead,” he hugged me. The rumour mill had made me a minor celebrity. “But you know what they say,” grinned Al, “any landing that you walk away from is a good one.”
When Bed Upreti was a boy, his father used to walk him from Dudiatharu to Bhaktapur and back—a journey of 10 days one way. Sometimes, the young boy got to ride a horse and earned a family reputation for adventures and risk-taking.

After his studies, Upreti joined the Army and eventually became a pilot to enjoy his passion for exploration. He flew for a private airline and was then recruited by Kingfisher in India. Today, he is an ATR 72-600 instructor pilot and simulator trainer for Lion Air in Indonesia.

“The memory of riding through the forests and mountains in far-western Nepal never left me, and I have always wanted to give back to Nepal what Nepal gave to me,” Upreti says. After publishing picture books of aerial photography, Upreti bought an abandoned Fokker 100 jet in Kathmandu, dismantled and transported it 790km to Bhaktapur to set up an Aviation Museum.

Encouraged by unexpected visitor numbers and feedback, he embarked on an even more ambitious project. Every time he flew back to Kathmandu airport, he used to see a parked Airbus 330-300 that had suffered a runway excursion incident in 2015 and had been written off. He bought the place, and in partnership with the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN), is setting up an even bigger Aviation Museum in Kathmandu. Across the Ring Road in Sinamangal, the huge jet is being reassembled after being cut into ten pieces and trucked over.

“Bringing the Airbus here from 600km away was more difficult than taking the Fokker from Kathmandu to Bhaktapur,” says Upreti, “this is a much bigger aircraft and the museum and the project is six times more costly.”

Once completed in September, visitors will first climb up to the aircraft through a ramp into what used to be business class, watch a slideshow about aviation and go into the cockpit to look out at Kathmandu airport and listen to air traffic control. The cabin has a section on aviation history and will have a replica of the Wright Brother’s plane which is being made by Pulchowk Campus engineering students. As an avid photographer, Upreti will also have an exhibition of aerial pictures taken all over Nepal.

The Airbus gallery will serve as a small kitchen for a café at the back of the plane where there is also a section on Humla. A grounded Eurocopter AS350 Enoureu will be on display in the garden, which will later have a children’s park and gift shop.

The Bed Upreti Trust funds cancer care, and has invested $60 million in the project. When open it will take 100 visitors a day, entrance fees will be Rs 350 and Rs 150 for students. It is free for Grade 6-12 as a part of CAAN’s effort to motivate young Nepalis to take up careers in aviation because the International Civil Aviation Authority (ICAO) predicts a shortage of pilots and technicians in the next decades.

One afternoon this week, Upreti was conferring with former Nepali Army engineer Raja Mahat about welding to a mock-up of the engine nozzle, installing the main landing gears, and supervised fuselage painting.

Upreti comes to Nepal once a month to inspect progress, and says, “I have been to 80 countries, but Nepal is the most challenging place to fly in because of weather and terrain. It is very fulfilling to see the museum taking shape, and I hope it will inspire a new generation of Nepali pilots and engineers.”
Fired up over tobacco

Nepal should focus on its current commitments before taking on plain packaging of cigarettes

Earlier this month, Health Minister Gagan Thapa told a workshop of South Asian activists fighting tobacco use that Nepal would adopt plain packaging of cigarettes in 2018 and make the country tobacco-free by 2030. Revealed just weeks before World No Tobacco Day on 31 May, the minister’s timing was great, but what about the content of his message?

In Nepal, tobacco use causes 15% of all deaths in men older than 30, and women 2%, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO). There’s also growing recognition that the economic cost to countries of tobacco use is money lost to development for which funding is getting harder to find.

Plain packaging is the latest in tobacco control. It extends the trend of putting increasingly large, shocking photos on packages to warn about tobacco’s health hazards. Pictorial, or graphic, warnings are one measure contained in the global blueprint for fighting tobacco use: the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. Nepal joined the treaty in 2007.

Plain packs go a step further. They retain larger warnings and remove all logos, colours, and unique fonts to make packages unattractive as possible, especially to potential smokers, usually minors. Australia, France and the UK have adopted plain packs and a handful of other countries, including Canada, New Zealand and Norway, have launched the process.

While setting the 2030 target for a tobacco-free Nepal may be a smart way to motivate campaigns against tobacco use, plain packaging plans might be too much too soon. There are other more urgent measures.

Health Minister Thapa announced early this year that as of 14 March tobacco would be sold in special, licensed shops only, not in general stores. That hasn’t happened yet. Buying a single cigarette, a great way to get kids started smoking, is still easy. Public smoking bans are not strictly enforced. New local governments could play a rule in implementing these measures but only if effectively lobbied first.

In May 2015 Nepal became the world’s leader in graphic warnings, requiring that they cover 90% of the front and back of packs. The move put this country ahead of tobacco control pioneers Australia, the first country to adopt plain packaging, and Uruguay, the first with warnings larger than 75 per cent, as well as Thailand (see former #1).

Yet more than two years later, not all packs have 90% warnings. Manufacturers outside the country have no choice but to comply if they want their cigarettes to clear customs but not all local players have followed. Instead, they have launched court cases against the provision.

Court challenges are a common tactic of the global tobacco industry (sales of $699 billion in 2015) and just the threat of them has prevented some governments from going ahead with measures like larger graphic warnings. But Big Tobacco took its opposition to Australia’s plain packaging to a new level.

Besides suing in a national court, Phillip Morris International (PMI) argued that the country’s pioneering move violated a bilateral investment treaty between Australia and Hong Kong, and launched a court case in the World Trade Organisation using proxies Indonesia, Costa Rica, Honduras and Dominican Republic.

While PMI lost in all three venues, the UK and Ireland have also been sued for plain packs so it is likely that if Nepal goes ahead it will also be targeted, a move that could drain substantial money and other resources. Thapa revealed in this month’s workshop that he has been pressed by tobacco firms over the 90% warnings.

Taxing tobacco is said to be the most effective way to get current smokers to stop or cut back, and to prevent potential users from getting addicted. But Nepal’s tax rate of 28% is one of...
In a puff of smoke

Nepal has some of the strictest laws against smoking, but suffers from poor enforcement

SONIA AWALE

Last year, Health Minister Gagan Thapa called for pictorial warnings to cover 90% of cigarette packs. The Ministry of Health announced that from mid-March tobacco products could only be sold in authorised shops. Nepal plans to introduce plain cigarette packaging by 2018, and make the country tobacco free by 2030.

“People’s attitudes have changed, no one serves cigarettes at parties anymore, and passengers have stopped smoking in public vehicles,” points out anti-tobacco activist Shanta Lali Muni. “We have some of the best anti-tobacco policies in the world. It is the implementation that has held us back.”

For example, the 90% pictorial warning on cigarette packs is only enforced for imported brands, the sale of tobacco products at licensed vendors has not gone into effect yet, the sale of cigarettes in public places isn’t strictly monitored.

Physician Anil Bikram at the Heartpury Hospital says that continued easy access and indirect promotion in social media platforms are drawing younger people to smoking.

At the Ministry of Health Secretary Sallendra Rul Uperti admits that there is room for improvement. “The Health Ministry makes laws and policies, but for enforcement we need coordination with other agencies. We have to work harder on that.”

One way Nepal could further reduce smoking prevalence is to raise taxes. WHO recommends at least 70% excise on tobacco products, but Nepal has one of the lowest taxes in the region at 28%, far behind Sri Lanka (73%).

“We have to make it difficult for cigarette companies to sell their products by increasing taxes and enforcing plain packaging,” suggests cardiologist Pritadha Rul Ragari.

Despite a gradual decline in tobacco production in Nepal, the industry is a lucrative source of revenue for the government, which collected Rs. 9 billion in excise from tobacco products, contributing 4.37% to the total tax net in the last fiscal year.

However, the state spent Rs.16 billion for the treatment of diseases directly related to tobacco use. Many lose the most productive years of life, families plunge into poverty, and the state has to divert resources away from development to treat tobacco-related morbidity.

Says activist Shanta Lali Muni: "Stronger regulation is necessary, but tobacco control is our collective responsibility. Everyone has to be involved in raising awareness if we want to make Nepal tobacco free by 2030.”

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The lowest in South Asia compared to Sri Lanka (74%) and India (63%). In India, a public debate has raged for months over what rate of goods and services tax to apply to tobacco products, especially beedis. Thapa has singled out tobacco tax as a main funding source for various new health projects, which is another reason that raising this should be a priority for him and his successors. This holds for smokeless products like gutka, khaini and surri too.

Notably, 20% of boys and 13% of girls in Nepal used some form of smokeless tobacco in 2011, which is higher than in most of the region. Officials should also keep an open mind about electronic cigarettes, unlike many neighbouring countries. Although the evidence base on its effects is still small, it appears increasingly likely that they are not as harmful as cigarettes, and can be useful to help smokers quit the habit.

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WHO SMOKES?

Proportion of Nepali adult males who smoke


46% 42% 40% 39% 37%
The LGBTI tales, Book-arts to watch. The Lamachine Project: Ten Years Later, a play adapted to stories of Nepal's LGBTI community. The iconic hate crime is based on the story of Matthew Shepherd in Lamachine, UK. 19-20 May, Nepal Tourism Board, Kt. 200-750 980 1102060

Everest Green, We're a part of discussion with Everest Green team to learn about mountain environment awareness. 30 May, 6pm Ashane-Francois de Kearchnur 9605484122

Living heritage Jon Simrik Akter as it celebrates its 8th anniversary with a painting exhibition by Lak Chruskar and special music performance by Kishal Shahrar, Inus So and Mushie Shiwaka 27-29 May, 7pm onwards Simrik Akter, Patan Bhako (01) 5328180

Coffee queries For interesting business ideas and experiences, entrepreneurs, students and start-ups can participate in Monday morning coffee queries. 29 May, 9-17 am Brookhouse and Bikes, Motepungunj http://www.chuka.com/events/77

Bird watching Celebrating this year’s World Enviroment Day by watching birds and walking in the nature. 27 May, 7am Pani Muhit, Sishapant 9851156200

Kora Cycling Join hundreds of cycling enthusiasts and ride 54, 75, or 100 km to raise funds for a cycling trail in the Bungmati area of Kathmandu valley. 15 July, 7am onwards Pott Farbar Square https://www.facebook.com/kinkara/

Gypsy jazz Book your table to enjoy a Jazzy evening with Hari Mahajan. 27 May, 6pm onwards, Pasauli’s Garden, Boluwasha, B 680, 9803919375

Gymnastics Crossfit, An exhibition featuring the works of Korean artist Hyun Ju Kim and printmakers from Australia, Nepal and Pakistan. 28 May-18 June Siddhartha Art Gallery (01) 4371000

Tone Stage Sandy Kigwireri, Underlying Inc, Birit in silence and Pyathalok khenni will be performing live in the Lakeside city. 28 May, 4-7.30 pm, Rolling Stones Rock Bar Lakeside, Pokhara, W 409

Sound of music Jan Nasty, Faramia S. Rana, VNP, Synthmas, Tyran Musik and Guisile for a musical evening. 3 June, 6pm onwards Aruna Bar & Lounge, Tripureswor

Wine and dine, Indulge in a four-course Italian meal paired with white wines with Chef Mauro. Get to know their new menu. 27 May, 7pm onwards Box restaurant, Hyatt Regency, W 4200 (01) 5171174

Wine and dine, Indulge in a four-course Italian meal paired with white wines with Chef Mauro. Get to know their new menu. 27 May, 7pm onwards Box restaurant, Hyatt Regency, W 4200 (01) 5171174

Mum’s Garden Resort, Head out to Pokhara for a peaceful and comfortable stay in beautifully designed cottages surrounded by a lush green garden with great views of Phewa Lake and the Annapurna range. Lakeside, Pokhara, (08) 5434500. www.mumsgardenresort.com

Dwarka’s Hotel, A little slice of paradise hidden in the middle of the city. Start the day off with complimentary yoga classes in this grand heritage hotel. Battisputali, Kathmandu, (01) 4477700

Eco-friendly living. Support our favorite basketball team at the Turkish Airlines ENGAGE Empowerment League organized to sustain physical and mental well-being of players with physical disabilities. 27 May evening (6-10 pm), National Army Sports Complex Centre, Lagankalin. 9894 69 6300. info@engagebasketball@gmail.com

Singing, Get food-court experience with authentic eats from Singapore and Malaysia top by try the blueberry cheese cake. (01) 5500972, 9814968168

Monsun madness, Head down to Pokhara and enjoy an exclusive two nights three days package with Shangri-La Village Resort. Pokhara, W 6,775 per person (01) 4401025 / 9861580717 / 9864181714

Hotel Shangri-La, Let the pleasures of Arabian cuisine taste your palate or opt for pasta if you’re not too adventurous. With food: Every Saturday, 7am-3pm, Sherobaadi Garden, Hotel Shangri-La, W 1500 (01) 4471999

Little Italy Turn vegetarian at this Italian food chain and don’t forget to end your meal with the chef’s special chocolate bomb. Kamalpokhari, W 4222727, 4223578 9801175000

Phat Kath, Offering delicious Jill food, a takeaway, tiffin service, ice cream and hoppers for hoppers, tables and chairs for normal people, and a formidable flip top soundtrack for everyone. (07) 985889877

Sang-Ma, Get food-court experience with authentic eats from Singapore and Malaysia, top by trying the blueberry cheese cake. (01) 5500972, 9814968168

Café Swotha, An intimate setting in the heart of Pokhara, with an atmosphere of sophistication, romantic warmth. Pokhara, (01) 5357704 info@solokhanfotome.com np

Dining queries For interesting food ideas and experiences, foodies, entrepreneurs, students and start-ups can participate in Monday evening dining queries. 29 May, 9-17 am Brookhouse and Bikes, Motepungunj http://www.chuka.com/events/77


Alithi Resort & Spa, A quiet sanctuary that fuses Nepali tradition with modern amenities, complete with a fancy pool and a easy restaurant. Srisne, Pokhara, (08) 446606, info@alithiresort.com
Former government secretary Balananda Paudel, who headed the Local Bodies Restructuring Commission fears that the government decision to increase the number of village councils in the Tarai is political expediency, and says there is a danger that devolution may be sabotaged by forces of centralism.

Himal: The government has added local bodies three weeks before the second phase of local elections. Your take?

Balananda Poudel: According to Section 295 of the Constitution, local level restructuring should be done through a Commission that is the sole authority on the number and demarcation of local levels as per the basic and criteria set by the government. The Commission decided on 719 local councils and said that the number can go up to 744, but we had given a certain limit for each district. The government has now added more local councils to Province 2. There is no provision for this in the Constitution. Parliament can give the government the right to restructure. But no such law has been made till date.

After the recommendation is received, the government has to decide within six months. But all this has to be done at least a year before the elections as defined in Article 5 of the Act. Based on which Act and law did the government take the decision?

What are the implications? The Constitution has separated the work of the three levels of government. The Province was decided by the government but it was not possible to get into the details of local levels, therefore an independent commission was formed. The idea was to structure local levels in a way that it could fulfill the role and responsibility mentioned in the Constitution. We found that we needed a small number of local bodies. The economy of scale does not allow more than 200 local units, but that wasn’t possible. Because there was the huge job of setting up the system with local representatives, who could run the government and form laws. So we chose a middle path and came up with 565 local levels which in itself was not an ideal number. After we completed 74 districts, the government came up with a different criteria and the numbers increased further. The biggest danger here is that the local bodies may not be capable to use their rights because of which the power may be centralized once again. There is a danger we might be backtracking from federalism.

Is federalism at risk then? There are certain political forces that want the power to be with provinces and then there are others who say we should not go into federalism. There is a danger of devolution of powers being subjugated by forces of centralism. There is another danger as well: federalism is the medium for better, effective, responsible and transparent governance. If we lose these, the government and the entire system will fall. Another misunderstanding is that more units are needed for development. The argument is that there should be more local bodies in the Tarai as the population is higher. If more units meant more development, I would support it too but there no proof that supports the statement. It may just result in more ineffective governments.

The most dangerous thing is that the government decided to restructure the boundaries three weeks prior to the elections. This will create confusion among voters. For political reasons?

I cannot see any legal, constitutional or ideological justification for this decision. Even the procedure is problematic.
Ridley Scott’s iconic film *Alien* (1979) broke all boundaries when it came out, with Sigourney Weaver in an unforgettable lead role as Officer Ellen Ripley, a tough, gorgeous heroine who set the standard for sci-fi to come. Thirty-eight years later, after three sequels in 1986, 1992, and 1997, *Prometheus* returned, with Scott returning to the helm to bring back the energy to an indifferent franchise.

The *Alien* films, set in humanity’s future, navigate the terrifying encounters between space travelers and the titular aliens who haunt all of the films. In the first film, Ripley and her crew first encounter these murderous creatures on a planetoid. Ripley escapes, only to face them again and again in the sequels. The origin of the creatures remains the central mystery throughout all of these films. With *Prometheus*, Scott returns to the origins of both mankind and the alien, taking us on a space journey on the eponymous alien to what could possibly have been the beginnings of the sleek, murderous, black creatures that famously use humans to incubate their spawn.

*Alien: Covenant* has yet another title named after a space ship, picks up ten years after the *Prometheus* mission spins out of control. *Covenant* is an entirely different mission altogether, her crew consisting of couples who are in charge of two thousand souls traveling in stasis, in pods that keep them asleep and preserved through space travel in search of *Origo-6*, a planet that they have identified as suitable to start a new colony. Also on board is Walter (Michael Fassbender), the synthetic android first created as David 8 (also played by Fassbender) who was on the *Prometheus* crew. When the ship encounters difficulties due to a neutron blast, Walter is forced to wake up the crew. Tensions emerge when the Covenant receives a transmission from a nearby planet that also appears extremely habitable; they are still 7 odd years away from *Origo-6* and would have to go back to their pods; a reluctance compounded by the captain’s demise in stasis during the neutron flare. Thus begins the crew’s ill-fated descent towards the planet that initially showed so much promise.

This new *“Alien”* film is a hybrid of science fiction and space horror, it takes us on a journey that brings us a step closer to solving the central mystery, but also through a series of dreadful revelations, including a deeply sinister plot that involves the enigmatic David 8, who at the risk of a spoiler, is lying in wait for the crew of the Covenant.

While there are smaller shocks, there are no really big surprises here. The first *Alien* film was a true pioneer, those that have come after it have relied heavily on the menace of that initially conceived, viciously capable killer — to the detriment of truly innovative storyline. *Alien: Covenant* does not differ but it does provide stunning special effects, and some moments of very real trepidation.

**MUST SEE**

Sophia Pande

(2012), a prequel to the first *Alien* film was released, with Scott returning to the helm to bring back the energy to an indifferent franchise.

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**LATER:** Prime Minister Prachanda Koirala Dahal announced his resignation in a 24-minute televised address to the nation on Tuesday.

**ANTI-CORRUPTION CARDS:** Newly appointed Chief of the Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA), Deep Ganjyal, greets President Bidya Devi Bhandari after being sworn in at Shital Niwas on Monday.

**WE SWEAR:** Chil Biju Mahatian and Gita Satyal are sworn in as Mayor and Vice Mayor of Lalitpur Metropolitan City in Jawalakhel on Wednesday.

**HUMANITARIAN PARTNERS:** Representatives from the government, diplomatic community, zones and UN agencies congregate at the Humanitarian Staging Area at Kathmandu Airport on Thursday to plan for future emergencies.

**EMPOWERED PLAYERS:** Abdul Ahad Turner Keven of Turkish Airlines hands over a trophy during the second edition of Turkish Airlines ENGAGE Empowering League on Tuesday.
Radically decentralised

Newly-elected representatives have a huge challenge to fulfil the people’s pent-up expectations.

MAN CITY: Newly elected Mayor Dilip Pratap Khand of Waling of Syangja represents a new breed of local politicians.

CONNECTING DOTS

Nepal has now entered an ambitious new phase in its history called ‘radical decentralisation’ and much of whether it will work will depend on these leaders. As the head of a municipality and from an area that is relatively privileged in education, Khand starts with lots of advantages.

The dream he has built and successfully sold to the voters of Waling as a ‘Smart City’. After the government declared ten different towns all over Nepal to be developed under this concept, the term has received attention from both voters and candidates.

“We have a few villages that are really cut off even within the Municipality. The awareness level among a majority of voters has increased this time, but some people still live in the 17th century,” explained Khand, who was elected deputy mayor in the last local election 20 years ago.

Khand’s candidature came as a shock to me. I was perhaps expecting a calmer picture of development in rural Nepal. Having grown in a place with schools and basic medical facilities only five minutes walk away, I had no idea how underserved some areas of my hometown still were.

After the nation entered into a federal structure local governments are now powerful bodies with the authority to make decisions on most issues of direct relevance to the people. This enormous responsibility has increased public expectations of local bodies, and the high turnout in the first phase of elections has shown the eagerness among people to have their own representatives.

Some skeptics have expressed concern that revolutionary decentralisation could just be a conspiracy to wreck federalism and to reinstate a unitary governance structure. That seems far-fetched. The real challenge now, and the reason for its failure if decentralisation fails, will be much more intrinsic to our polity, society, culture and outside intervention.

Firstly, there are clear signs that the transition to this new system is fraught because of the clumsiness of our bureaucracy. The government is shockingly ill-prepared to decentralise. The law regarding local governance is yet to be drafted. Regulations have not yet been framed. When elected representatives take office, they will be working in a systemic vacuum. There is hardly any debate in the public sphere about this, and the result could be that no one will be really accountable.

Secondly, corruption at the local level will be difficult to control. For two decades, local councils have been run by bureaucrats and since the end of the conflict in 2006 by a ‘political mechanism’—a euphemism for local cartels that have divided up the spoils.

Local politicians have thrived in a culture of patronage and corruption, acting as brokers between corrupt officialdom and the people. The success of previous representatives at local levels was marked by the contacts they had at the ‘centre’ and the deference they displayed in being able to draw favours from the rulers in Kathmandu for their area.

Another challenge for the new local government bodies is the mountain of expectations and imposed foreign concepts. The citizenry is exposed to a world dramatically altered by globalisation and the information revolution this adds to the people’s expectations from their elected local leaders even though many of them may not be in tune with the latest developments around the world. Combined with the modus operandi of the aid industry this will add huge challenges to local bodies.

Khand is aware of these challenges, and says he has a plan. He told me: “We can call it Smart City or something else, but in effect we have to develop as a cluster of really well administered villages supported by a strongly self-reliant town at the center.”

At least in my hometown, talking to my new mayor, I had a feeling of optimism that last week’s elections has brought a man who seems to know what he is doing and is aware of the enormous challenges ahead. May there be more mayors and village heads like Dilip Pratap Khand.
INCLUDING THE EXCLUDED

The real winners of the local elections are not political parties, but women

OM ASTHA RAI

When Bidya Devi Bhandari became Nepal’s first woman President in 2015, cynics dismissed her arguing that she was the widow of a political leader, it was a ceremonial position anyway, and one woman becoming head of state did not change the lives of millions of downtrodden women in Nepal. Then, Onsari Gharti Magar became Nepal’s first female Speaker of Parliament and Sushila Karki the first ever woman Chief Justice. Naysayers were still unimpressed.

Now that 15,000 women have been elected to local governments in the first phase of elections this month, even the skeptics are grudgingly nodding their heads. After all, as is said, a journey of a thousand miles has to begin with the first few steps. “Our first female President is an inspiration for all young women, but that was mostly symbolic, now elections thousands of women to Municipal, Village and WARD Councils is a much more of an achievement,” says UML leader Asta Laxmi Shakya.

As the Election Commission prepares to wrap up vote counting from the first phase, women have certainly emerged as the biggest winners. Ahead of local elections, there was speculation that political parties would violate or distort constitutional provisions to have women as either mayor, village chiefs or vice mayors and village depots. Political parties did try their best to prevent women from being elected to the top two executive posts in many Municipalities and Village Councils. They forged

KANTTIKA SEJUWAL
Nepal Congress, Mayor, Chandannath Municipality, Jumla

APSARA NEUPANE
CPN (Maoist Centre), Deputy Mayor, Chandannath Municipality, Jumla

GENDER LANDSCAPE

Of the 283 local councils that went to the polls on 14 May, two have got women as both Mayor and Deputy Mayor, 15 have got women Chair and men Deputy Chair and 263 have got women as Vice Chair.

All-men municipalities
Janak Poudel (righ) and Surendra Khadka are newly elected Mayor and Vice Mayor of Baglung district. Inter-party electoral alliances have resulted in all-men leadership in 21 local councils

LAXMI PANDEY
Nepal Congress, Chair, Huskot Village Council, Nawalparas

KOPILA MALLA
CPN (UML), Deputy Chair, Huskot Village Council, Nawalparas
Double affirmation

These elections have brought a revolution for the rights of Dalit women

OM ASTHA RAI

A ll her life, Farzad Bisunke (pictured, above), has faced triple discrimination: as a woman, a Dalit and as a Dalit woman. She was fortunate enough to go to school along with her four younger brothers, but first had to finish household chores every morning. Her brothers never needed to work in the kitchen. Bisunke did well in Sanskrit in class, and was recommended for a scholarship to study in Varanasi. But the headmaster rejected it saying Dalits did not need to master the language of the priesthood.

When Bisunke was chosen by the UML as a candidate in Kurukhmet Municipality, she faced opposition from Dalit men within her own party who felt their contribution was undermined just because they were men. After winning the election last week, Bisunke thought the achievement would finally reduce ostracism by other castes as well as by men from her own community. But at her victory rally some supporters refused to smear auspicious red vermilion powder on her face because she was a Dalit.

“It was heart-breaking but not surprising,” she told us.

In some villages of the mid-western mountains of Distikh, Dalits can buy a cup of tea at just Rs 9 while non-Dalit customers need to pay Rs 10. Dalits get a discount because they have to wash their own glasses.

“We are still treated as untouchable,” says Bisunke. “My electoral victory has not ended discrimination, but I will fight against it during my five year tenure.”

Bisunke is one of the 2,500 Dalit women who have been elected to Ward Committees of 283 Municipalities and Village Councils in the first phase of local elections on 14 May. This number will increase to 6,500 from 483 local government units in the second phase of polls on 14 June. Three Dalit women have also been elected Deputy Mayors and seven more as Deputy Chief Officers of Village Councils in results so far.

“This is revolutionary. Never before have Dalit women gained so much power in Nepal,” says rights activist Renu Shyamsundar. When Nepal held its last local elections in 1997, it was mandatory to elect one woman to every ward committee. Most women elected that year went on to fulfill greater political and social responsibilities.

“This year’s local polls have given to Dalit women what the 1997 local polls gave to women in general,” says Shivaji. “This is the biggest exposure Dalit women in Nepal have ever got.”

She adds, “It is now possible for a Dalit woman to be elected this year to be Nepal’s first Dalit woman president in 20 years time. I may be too optimistic, but the elections have surely given us a reason to hope for that.”

Nepal’s new Constitution in 2015 guaranteed that two of the five members of every Ward Committee would be female, but it was not constitutionally guaranteed that one of the two seats reserved for women would go to Dalit women.

Even when the Local Level Election Act 2017 was promulgated under the new Constitution, Dalit women still did not have one seat reserved. Jevan Parajyam, a Dalit MP from the NC, registered an amendment bill seeking reservation for one of the two seats reserved for Dalit women and had it passed by Parliament.

Parajyam says local elections have been like a revolution. He adds: “We often hear that it was the Maoist war that raised political awareness among Dalits, that was nothing compared to what has taken place with these local elections. Not just the winners, the losers will now prepare for the next elections, and beyond that. This will change the face of Nepali politics.”

Others are not so sure because they say that when political parties would not find suitable Dalit women candidates, they chose opportunists who were in many constituencies.

Kala Swarup, President of the Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO) says: “Given the socio-political and economic status of Dalit women, it was a given, but look at the bigger picture. This is a victory for all Dalit women in Nepal, not just for the 6,500 elected members.”

To be sure, not all Dalit women are taken candidates – many are educated, optimistated, articulate, courageous, and capable of influencing policy in self-governing local councils.

But like Farzad Bisunke, she was not chosen as a candidate for her cast and gender but her involvement in advocacy for human rights for which she won three awards for supporting people displaced by the Maoist war.

Bisunke, a political science student, is asked what next. Her confident reply: “To be a Mayor or Member of Parliament in five years.”
Climbing Mt Buggery

This week Nepal faced a crisis with far-reaching implications for its territorial integrity. When history looks back at this momentous time, it will be with a sense of shock and awe as to how we as a people survived such a cataclysmic threat to our stability as a nation. Yes, I am talking about the collapse of the Hillary Step.

Responding to this national crisis, the government of Nepal (GRAND) categorically denied that the landmark on the world’s highest mountains was no more. “Why do we say that? Because it is there,” Information Minister Kamal Thapa told reporters at a press conference in which not a single foreign correspondent asked him about the Prime Minister’s resignation a few hours before.

GRAND has also taken serious note of the increase in the number of people trying to climb Mt Everest illegally. A South African snowman who was caught in Langtang in the Khamtang region was found dead in a dungeon in Kathmandu for a pending payment of a $22,000 fine. Given the number of climbers these days who are illegally traversing Mt Everest from China to Nepal, an official of the Department of Immigration is establishing a Visa on Arrival desk on the summit. (Even vigilant, the department has also slipped a fine for overstaying his visa on a trekker who died last spring in Mustang.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Tourism and Livestock has obtained the last transcript of a conversation between Hillary and Temming during the first ascent of Mt Everest in 1953 which should finally put to rest the debate about who got to the top first. The content is said ‘R’ and we will require all unaccompanied minors at this point to run along outside and play on the swing for the duration of this column.

TENZING: (inflated, through oxygen mask) There is a lot of vertical rock here, I’ll have to fix ropes. Can we name this the Tensing Step?

HILLARY: Hope, I hereby name this the Hillary Step after myself.

TENZING: So, you’re up open.

HILLARY: That’s because I am trying to relieve myself and establish the highest urn: in human history.

TENZING: I check the wind direction first. Sir.

HILLARY: Steep, too late. Billions of blistering blisters, it’s so cold the NBA thing freezes and I’ll have to keep breaking off as I relieve myself over the Tibetan plateau.

TENZING: That’s the summit. I’ll race you to the top.

HILLARY: I’m so bored, I’ll take a short nap right here.

TENZING: It’s getting late, we’re nearly there, Sir. Here, let me carry you. (Tenzing Hillary on his shoulder, see pic above)

HILLARY: We climbed the 8,848m off, someday I’ll be on a New Zealand 85 note and on the cover of the NGA & National Geographic.

This scenic recording clearly proves that while Tensing was indeed first to set foot on top, Hillary by virtue of being on his shoulder actually reached a higher altitude above sea level. Back in Kathmandu, it turned out that Hillary was invited so Sir Ed was awarded an honorary Nepal citizenship in honour of his ability to swear like a native. As a Nepali, Hillary could then effortlessly fly to Lukla at one-third the tourist rate, and had to go to how Delhi to get an Aussie visa.

The Ass

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