Bridging hills and plains

When Madhes-based leaders rose up to 2013 against what they saw as a conspiracy in the new Constitution to further marginalise the plains, highlanders in the Tani were fearful for their safety. When violence broke out, many sold property and fled north.

In Birgunj, the epicentre of the 2015 blockade, cadres of Tani-centric parties would issue veiled but often blatant threats against hill settlers. Two years later, as Province 2 prepares for the first local elections in two decades, that fear has mostly dissipated, with mainstream parties fielding Madhesi candidates and some Tani-centric parties having candidates of hill ancestry.

Rastriya Janata Party Nepal (RJPN), the recently formed alliance of Madhesi parties, has chosen a Newar businessman as its mayoral candidate in Birgunj, Rajesh Man Singh (pictured above campaigning door-to-door). He was active during the Madhes Movement and supports greater autonomy for the plains in the new federal structure.

Says Birgunj-based rights activist Kamal Molan Koirala: “The RJPN and other Madhesi parties have sent out a message of harmony and social integration by choosing hill settlers as their candidates, and this has removed to a certain extent the sense of fear among them.”

The RJPN has also fielded six hill-origin candidates for Ward chairs in Birgunj, Federal Socialist Forum Nepal (FSFN), another Madhes-based party, has three highlanders as Ward chair candidates. Nepal Loktantrik Forum has not put up candidates in all ward committees, but it has one hill candidate in a Madhesi-dominated Ward.

After years of polarisation between hills and plains, the parties appear to have realised the benefits of integration. Candidates are busy campaigning for the polls on 18 September, and their message is no longer divisive, but about improving relations between traditionally excluded groups in the Tani and the rulers in Kathmandu.

Mainstream parties based in the capital have also fallen back on Madhesi candidates for local governments. Youth from mountain communities are actively campaigning for Madhesi candidates, and vice versa.

Instead of ethnic politics and caste vote banks turning communities against each other, therefore, next week’s local election has ended up bringing Nepalis in the Tani together.

Says Birgunj resident Babita Poudel, “It’s not that we people from the hills and the Tani don’t want to unite, it is politicians who are keeping us apart. They created a situation where the highlanders and the plains people competing hating each other.”

Julia Thomas Sirig

LAST BUT NOT LEAST
EDITORIAL

MAFAIRCACRY

by Shekhar Kharel

PAGE 2

GO KIRTIPUR

by Sebastian Welligandt

PAGE 8-9

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LAST BUT NOT LEAST

For much vaccination, the third phase of local elections is finally happening on 16 September. Times were already important polls because the eight plains districts of Province 2 between Panchthar and Saptari are electing leaders to much more empowered municipalities and village councils for the first time in 15 years. But what makes these polls more significant is that they will be a referendum on the issues raised by Mahaba government parties of the UML.

If the turnout is big and the NC, Maoist and UML dominate the votes, it will mean that the issues of federalism, regional autonomy, citizenship, delineation of constituencies and the use of Hindu language as raised by the Madhes-centric parties, were not of primary concern to the people of the Eastern Tarai.

If there is a massive turnout and a win for the Tarai-based parties, then we should understand that those issues are genuine, and the UML alliance truly articulates the interests of the people of the eastern plains. However, if the turnout is low, then more than three mainstream parties are ahead, it would show that most Madhesi voters have not bothered to cast their ballots and do not believe in the new Constitution under which the polls are being held.

Whatever the outcome, these elections have given the neglected peoples of the plains a say in their own development, and the very fact that this poll is going ahead is an indication that the Constitution has been endorsed. That Mahabharata-based parties are fielding candidates and mainstream parties all have Madhesi candidates is a sign of better hill-plains integration.

KURTIS BY DRONE

Kurtis is only like away from Kathmandu but isn’t much louder. The 17th century town isn’t exactly a tourist spot, but Kurtis is worth hopping. In Kurti’s cute little corner of the park, you’ll find several small, entrance-less temples.

STEALING PARADISE

While World Kidney Day observed by doctors’ protests, Kidney Day parade was organized in Lalitpur by the Nepal Kidney Foundation to raise awareness about kidney disease.

FLOOD, DEMOCRACY, POLITICS

I used to think that local elections would increase accountability and make leaders more responsible. (Times, Editorial, 16 September, 1975). But having seen the behaviour of Kathmandu’s mayor is not so sure. It’s also clear why the word is passing from the sun and moon to flood victims. Nothing is going to change unless we have a political alternative.

K. K Sharma

What is actually running Nepal? That, as they say, is not a million dollar question. But at stake is much more than a million bucks.

To be sure, we do have what could pass as a government. There is a Parliament, a Supreme Court, a civil service and security agencies. There is a supposedly independent, anti-corruption watchdog and a human rights commission. Too. We have these institutions in place, but still we don’t have good governance.

This week two years ago, nearly a decade of political transition and as the capital was still rocking from aftershocks of the earthquake, Parliament was sworn in a new Constitution. We hoped Nepal would finally be an innovative and well-governed nation. But, alas, we marked the second anniversary of the Constitution, hopes are fading fast.

So why aren’t we the right track yet? Just look around you— the land is fine, but it has been replaced by lots of little kings who treat Nepal as their fiefdom.

In a democracy, rulers should be accountable to people, but in our judicial secular rubbery they are more accountable to mafia. The currency rate is more valuable than the real rupee. The people are being looted, and are protected by political patronage. Even the anti-corruption watchdog is part of the corruption.

On. BK

GUEST EDITORIAL

SHIKHAR KHAREL

Mafiacy

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On. BK
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Civil society to the fray

You cannot wake up someone pretending to sleep

In a day goes by without another banner headline in the Nepali-language press exposing the blatant plunder of the state in brazen daylight, every one of these cases of looting have taken place with active participation of the kulsabha. The barabindra greed and the money involved has surpassed everything we have seen in Nepal’s corporate history.

The infection has set in from the head down, and has now spread out to the top political leadership. Using “political mechanism” to infiltrate the judiciary, legislature, bureaucracy, the security forces, human rights organisations and the anti-corruption watchdog, kejriwalas have sabotaged the system to divide up the spoils.

Last year, we had an indication of what was to come when one of Nepal’s most ruthless and corrupt officials was appointed to head the anti-corruption body. The man was himself exonerated in court because he had become a law unto himself, and because he threatened the power of the political establishment.

Pension and gratuity are guaranteed when power-hungry and corrupt representatives with a proven inability to lead in the national interest are given turns at the helm. MPs enact laws allowing politicians convicted of corruption to contest elections. The head of the Nepal Oil Corporation, embroiled in a land scam, is protected by political patrons. Parliamentarians are insulated by the medical-industrial complex. Despite Guwanda KC, whose personal wealth has been quantified at 80 billion rupees, and despite the non-functionality of even the Judicial Council, there is a lack of will to arrest the rot.

In the meantime, the political leadership continues to monitor the international community’s reaction to the government’s “anti-corruption” measures. The International Monetary Fund, the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and the European Union are watching and waiting, but they are not yet ready to take any action.

On the other hand, the civil society movement has been slow to react. Although many NGOs have been involved in anti-corruption campaigns, their efforts have been fragmented and isolated.

One hope is that the current government will be listened to and that real action will be taken to address the crisis.

The government has promised to create an independent anti-corruption body, but it remains to be seen whether this will happen.

In the meantime, the situation remains critical. The country is in a state of shock, and people are looking to the government for leadership. The civil society movement must step up its efforts to demand accountability and transparency.

**Millennium grant**

Finance Minister Gyana Prasad Subedi and Kazi signed a $500 million Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact on Friday at the State Department in Washington DC in the presence of Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan and MCC Acting CEO Jonathan Nash to upgrade connectivity and power transmission in Nepal.

**10 years with Etihad**

Etihad Airways is celebrating 10 years of service in Nepal by offering a 20% discount on economy and business class tickets to their 10 most favourite destinations in its network. Passengers have to book tickets by 25 September and travel by 21 March 2018.

**Turkish cargo**

Turkish Cargo has received accreditation as a Qualitative Environmental Supplier (QES) from temperature-controlled container provider Environair. This means that the airline now has a certification...
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AND INTENSE CHARACTER

KEEP WALKING

Global Trading Concern (P) Ltd.
PLEASE DRINK RESPONSIBLY.
Chatwin near Chitwan

When writer Bruce Chatwin visited Nepal, nothing could be ordinary.

A s might be expected, Bruce Chatwin is a restless guest. He paces my Kathmandu garden, and chafes if his nomadic yearnings cannot be indulged with long walks at least once every few days. Insisting on peace and solitude so that he can write undisturbed during the day, he craves entertaining company and fine food at night.

Bruce Chatwin with his boots in the 1982 photograph by Lord Snowdon.

With a writer’s eye and taste for the bizarre, he captures the most unlikely moments. I beg him: “Please tell me again the one about the priest in his robes with the pet kangaroo on the Australian beach.” Soon we are yet again helpless with laughter.

Between overseas visits for the Sunday Times, Bruce rode aloud the potholes of On The Black Hill (or was it the Vicar of Daidah?) I forgot lying on a china sofa during a soggy London afternoon in the tiny Albany flat let by one of his many protestant friends. He is escaping the imagined claustrophobic confines of his lovely stone-forged harbour-town in a remote Gloucestershire valley.

The melanin notebooks, walking obsession, horror of domesticity and intrinsic restlessness are already a carefully established legend, ever since In Patagonia. For me, the evocative purity of Bruce’s writing shines through all the self-regarding hype.

Between trips, he attends Tenzin and my wedding one July afternoon in 1986, on a sunny expanse of manicured lawn at a sprawling house in Hampshire with huguenot crest and 17th century paintings. “I am not an art dealer,” he hisses fiercely “as we inspect the magnificent Armada portrait of Queen Elizabeth I that hangs on the staircase between Joans to the world’s museums. Employed by Sotheby’s as auctioneer because of his sure eye and infallible taste, Bruce has to be classified as one of them.

On one particular Kathmandu visit, Bruce was once again stopping over on the way back from somewhere significant — was it from Australia and Sangla? After some time alone writing, his wife Elizabeth will join him from England. I arrange for them to rent a crumbling white painted and elaborately plastered bungalow with stained glass windows and bright ceramic floor tiles near the Narayanhiti Royal Palace. It is an historic spot, once lived in by a youthful Sir Edward when he worked for UNAID, and now the Old House Restaurant. So that he can write in comfort, I supplement the spartan furnishings in the old Rana cottage with a borrowed desk, lamp and chair and a gentle rosewood dild to clean, shave and cook.

Still conditions are not to Bruce’s liking. He aches and splutters, and blames the damp downtown Kathmandu winter fog. With Elizabeth he trots in Solukhumbu, and blames the persistent coughing on the altitude — but it does not stop him writing a lyrical piece on Everest, On Yeti, Tracks, that was published posthumously in What Am I Doing Here. He gets worse and blames his debilitation on a bone marrow fungus contracted from bat droppings while travelling in China. With Bruce, nothing can be ordinary.

After one of his visits to Nepal, I find left behind in my house a handful of well-thumbed volumes — Rimbaud, Ravel, Proust — and a handsome pair of Bruce’s fine calfskin walking boots.

During his last illness Bruce continued to reel, but not to Nepal. The steadfast Elizabeth took him to the embroidered churches of Greece, to the wilds of the Outer Hibiscus, and they settled briefly to the castellated hinterland of the south of France. The last time I saw him was on a quiet hilltop, encroached on by a large bed holding court in a suite at the Ritz in central London.

“Keep the boots. Give them to a charity,” says Elizabeth, ever practical, loyal and unsentimental after his untimely death of AIDS in early 1989. But Bruce’s boots are still sitting in my Kathmandu cupboard. One day, maybe, I will.
S
he packed a suitcase and
told her family she would be back in a week or so. There had been threats: a machete hung on the door of her newspaper office, a text saying she would be next.

Zaheena Rasheed, a journalist from the Maldives, fled the country on 31 August 2016 fearing for her safety because of reaction to a documentary she helped make. Stealing Paradise. She has been in exile ever since.

Rasheed is an investigative reporter who has uncovered high-level corruption despite censorship, a former editor of the Maldives Independent and recipient of the Index on Censorship Press Freedom Award 2017.

“A year has passed since I left, the situation in the Maldives has only got worse,” Rasheed told a conference of South Asian journalists in Kathmandu last week, organised by the International Federation of Journalists. Indeed, many of the tactics used against Rasheed were familiar to attending journalists. Stealing Paradise, made for Al Jazeera English, presented recorded interviews, data and correspondence from the former Maldivian vice president’s phones. The film received the One World Media Corruption Reporting Award, exposed international money laundering of up to $1.5 billion, and the sale of stocks for private gain by President Abdulla Yameen’s inner circle.

The Maldives media had been under attack ever since President Mohamed Nasheed was forced out of office in 2012. A TV station was torched, there was a near fatal attack on a journalist, and another journalist, Ahmed Rilwan from the Maldives Independent, disappeared in 2014. In April, blogger Yameen Rasheed was killed outside his apartment. Both Ahmed and Yameen were Rasheed’s colleagues.

Rasheed’s first foray into journalism was during the 2008 presidential elections for Minivan News, predecessor of the Maldives Independent. She remembers the time as one of “brutal freedom: ‘For the first time there were debates about policy. For the first time you had the choice of multiple candidates.’”

After she took over as editor of the Independent in 2011, she covered the political trials of opposition leaders, an explosion on the president’s speed boat and the purge of the judiciary and security forces that followed, investigating the details of her colleague’s disappearance for Stealing Paradise was emotionally intense for Rasheed. The leaks revealed shocking details, and her probe led to threats from the president not to pursue the story.

“How do you tell a story objectively when that story is something that is happening to people close to you? It was very hard to report updates on what was happening in that investigation,” Rasheed said. “As much as we talk about safety and security protocols, I think it’s really important to address mental health in the newsroom.”

Rasheed now works as a producer for Al Jazeera in Doha, and says there is a need for more on-the-ground coverage of countries less recognised by the international media.

“One of the things I’d like to do is Al Jazeera is focus on small countries that don’t get as much press first-hand: there are so many interesting stories that need to be told,” she said.

Despite lack of coverage of the conditions for journalists in the Maldives, Rasheed says the network of journalists across the region contributed to her safety and well-being after she left.

“One of the things that you hear often from Maldivian journalists is this sense of being alone, of not knowing what to do next,” she told Nepali Times. “You’re just caught up in these events happening to you and you don’t know how to react to them.”

She says journalists who face official intimidation and threats have a lot to learn from each other and need to build solidarity across the region. She adds: “We need a louder regional conversation on press freedom in South Asia.”
Kathmandu:
The 17th-century town’s slight altitude may have been diminished by pavement losses, but the kingdom that held out against the onslaught of Purba Gurkha State in 1782 still retains its pride, and its great astrological precision.

Sitting young chefs (left) at the Koshi Café, a favourite watering hole for visitors.

Bedru Khasahani, Prade and Shrestha (right) of the Kathmandu Valley in the 17th century.
Kirtipur in low motion

TEXT AND PHOTOS SEBASTIAN WOLLIGANDT

Situated along an elevated ridge in the southwest corner of Kathmandu Valley is Kirtipur, but it tends to feel farther away than it is, even for the inhabitants of the capital. People talk about it as if it is in the boondocks somewhere. This perception of isolation is what has kept the 12th century hilltop town largely untouched, even though it is only a 15-minute bus ride from the Ring Road.

The sense of pride and fierce independence is in the DNA of Kirtipuris because this was where Prithvi Narayan Shah’s conquistadors came to a grinding halt in 1767, as he faced stiff resistance in his strategy to take over the Kathmandu Valley.

Today, the town of 66,000 people is still not actively promoted by tour operators, who prefer the traditional Bhaktapur-Patan-Swayambhunath loop. If they do come, tourists tend to visit just the main temple, have lunch and then head back to their homestays in Thamel or Patan.

But Kirtipur is worth lingering in. Life progresses in slow motion among relatively clean and well-preserved streets, and residents are a relaxed lot. The old city, with its ancient neighbourhoods, is nearly car-free, and the place has the aura of an open museum - much the same as Kathmandu or Patan used to be 40 years ago. There is only one hotel and two easy-to-find homestays.

“Normally visitors stay only two to three hours here in Kirtipur,” says guide Shrawan Mahajan at the Tourist Information Centre. “Now the situation is better, but the government should promote Kirtipur more. Only one in 10 tourists visiting Nepal in 2015 came here.”

Baba Maharjan started his homestay in 2004, after being a trekking guide for a Swedish company. “Kirtipur is only 5km away from Kathmandu, but very few know about it. When people come to my place, they are astounded how stunning it is.” He gets about 200 guests a year in his four rooms.

Nepal’s Vision 2020 seeks to increase tourist arrivals to 2 million, and tourism-related employment to 1 million. After the earthquake in 2015, tourism has rebounded (see graph online) with half of visitors from five countries: India (14%), China (14%), Sri Lanka (8%), US (7%) and UK (6%). Saroj Tulsidas, 27, is a hotel management graduate who sees a bright future in tourism in Kirtipur. His restaurant, Kashi, overlooks the slump after the earthquake and blockade, and is now running well. Unlike many of his friends who have gone abroad, Tulathar has decided to make a living in his native town and has no regrets. “My only problem is finding good stuff for the kitchen,” he says.

Predeep Khadgi, a Kirtipur-based film maker, is shooting a movie on Kirti Laxmi. It’s based on a book by Bau Pasang about the woman who kept fighting for her bow and arrows even after Prithvi Narayan finally captured the town in 1767, and took her own life after being arrested. He hopes to revive awareness among Nepalis about Kirtipur’s history, and correct some of the misconceptions.

ACCOMMODATION

Kirtipur Hill Side Resort
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Momemtum Nepal
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RESTAURANTS

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www.facebook.com/KashiCafeKirtipur

Kamala Chaam
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891-824623
www.facebook.com/KAMALACHAAM

Saav Newari Restaurant
Traditional Newari dishes
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Vista Pointe Restaurant
International and fusion dishes
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www.vistapointe.com

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TEMPLES

Uma Maheshwar
The pagode-style, three storied temple is at the highest point, (61m) of Kirtipur. Two storey temples can be seen on the streets of Kirtipur. In 1767 the two temples were attacked by the British, who were later in the earthquake of 1934.

Bhairab
The temple is the place of worship for pious local people. It is said that Shiva (Lord Shiva) and Shakti (Goddess Parvati) were married here in the early 11th century.

Kirtipur Achale Durga (Dhanka Durga)
It has an inscription (Nepali text) which says ‘Durga Bhakta Durga Durga’. Durga was worshipped for three days and the image is believed to have been built by an unknown maker, and turned into a statue in 1357.

Shri Kirti Vihar
Nagarkot, Kirtipur is a Theravada Buddhism temple

KIRTIPUR BY DRONE

Take flight in this video for a bird’s eye view of the historical biking tour of Kathmandu, and dig for a street level tour of its temples and eateries.
Nepal Africa Film Festival
Which selected African Time as the 5th edition of the Nepal Africa Film Festival. 18-20 September, Sam Spun, Russian Cultural Centre, Kathmandu. (01) 4819065

100 years of Toni Hagen. Dashi Miss this opportunity to see Nepali through the eyes of Toni Hagen in an exhibition of his works to mark 100 years of his birth anniversary. 16-24 September, Sam Spun, Nepal Art Council, Bodin Hotel, (01) 4430735

Kathmandu Marathon, Register to join hundreds of others in the 11th Kathmandu Marathon. People above 18 can participate in the full (42.1 km) or half marathon (21km) or open category (5km), while those above 12 can choose the school (5km) or wheelchair (1km) category. 16 September, Sam Spun, Dasharath Rangaswami Stadium, Kathmandu, 01718947

Art therapy. Register on time to attend the introduction to creative arts therapy workshop facilitated by Netha Chotuprak, a licensed creative arts therapist and registered dance/movement therapist. 16 September, Balcony 4-5pm, Matha Kali Hall, Gyaneshwar, Kathmandu, 9853077777

Cultural studies. Become a member of Cultural Studies Group of Nepal and enjoy fascinating lectures on Nepal’s heritage, walk in and around the Kathmandu Valley and visit收缩 sights. 27 September, Sam Spun, Shikhar Hotel, Lukang, Kathmandu, info@nsckathmandu@gmail.com; Membership: Rs.13,000/yr

Japanese art. Visit this exhibition to view some of the finest paintings by japanese artists Missuki Suzuki and Yutaka Suzuki. 18-27 September, 10am-5pm, Kitani, Balcony, Kathmandu, 014778976; 01482233

Sign up your Friday night Zumba or to a fresh night listening to soulful classics and soft Nepali and Indian hits featuring The Silent Kites Band. 22 September, 8-12pm, Japan Restaurant, Satdobato, Kathmandu, 9814019194

Move with the flow. Spend the weekends with close friends singing to the rhythms of the Flow. 18 September, 7pm, Atto Lounge Restaurant, Kamalpokhari, Kathmandu. (01) 2301981

Friday night live, warm up your Friday night looking to soulful classics and soft Nepali and Indian hits featuring The Silent Kites Band. 22 September, 5-9pm, Japan Restaurant, Satdobato, Kathmandu, 9814019194

Nitro tour. Book your ticket now for the Nepalese show of acrobatic metal band Nitro, featuring vocalist Jay Gilette and legendary gurad Marlon Brando. They will be joined by drummer Chris Adler and bassist Matt DeStefano of American metal band Lamb of God. 27 September, 8-11pm, Purple House Rock Bar, Thankot, Kathmandu. 9815795781

Rock & Roll. Enjoy our rock and roll by local band The Trainers while enjoying scrumptious delicacies and drinks. 16-18 September, 3-9pm, Moti Alohi The Inam and Amour, (01) 459501

Utopia, For a hands on umbrella and mouth watering food, delivery service available. (01) 5090584

Saigon Pho, Spacious interior with authentic Vietnamese dishes. Lalitpur. (01) 4442238

Cordial Café, Perfect place for breakfast, lunch or dinner. The only place in town where you can shop for wine or your choose as you dine. Lalitpur. (01) 4440432

Around the Corner. Spend an evening and have a dine-in nature experience. The homey environment at this full service restaurant adds twists to your food. Alipiri (inside the Standard Memory), 9814771957

Kasara Resort, A luxury resort located in the lush setting of Chitwan National Park. For those who value their privacy and serenity, a more secluded stay, Kasara offers two private villas with private pools. (01) 4436771-4439872, kassararesort.com

Pokhara Grande, A swimming pool to lounge in the refreshing heat, a massage parlour and spa to loosen up and a gym to release stress: a great place to unwind. Lakeside, Pokhara. (069) 465210; dx@hotpokhara.com, www.pokharagrande.com


Temple Tree Resort and Spa, A perfect place to stay, combine with a swimming pool, massages and spa. It will be hard to leave once you are arrived. Lalitpur, Lakeside. (01) 488761

Chhimalee Resort, Enjoy the beauty of nature and a peaceful weekend. Perfect for BTLs, families and family/friends. Dabhadeal, (01) 4407272, 9813784349

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Cash and caste

Sindhu Poudel Yadav, in Peace Talk Daily, 2 September

Ahead of the much-delayed last phase of local elections, there is excitement in the air throughout Province 2. People here are happy to be able to elect their own mayors and village chairs for the first time in 25 years, which can ‘never grasp grassy democracy and ensure provincial and parliamentary polls in November.

This marks the successful implementation of the Constitution, effectively institutionalising republicanism, federalism and socialism. But there is a threat to our democracy, and none of the political parties see it coming. They have only considered cash and caste in electing candidates. Only those who could arrange or attract cash vote banks were given tickets.

This has sent a message: you have to be wealthy to venture into politics, your ideology or loyalty to your party alone will not get you an election ticket. This trend will only encourage corruption, entrench communal polarisation and erode democracy.

In a weak democracy, public anger will foster and Nepal could plunge into another cycle of conflict and instability.

In the Tarai, more than a dozen VDCs have been merged into single village councils, with populations exceeding 10,000.igger constituencies mean more money must be spent campaigning, which the poor but honest cannot manage.

In India, we have seen a tea seller becoming Prime Minister. That may be too much to ask in Nepal for now. But the least hope is that a subsistence farmer gets elected as his village council chief. If only capitalists can come and win elections in a communist-majority Nepal, our democracy is doomed.

(Sindhu Poudel Yadav is an advocate and writes this op-ed for Kisko’s most circulated newspaper.)

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BIG LITTLE LIES

Earlier this year HBO returned to its tradition of altering some of the best television around. Just as it had pioneered Sex and the City (1998-2004), which changed how we view writing for television, with Big Little Lies the tradition has come round yet again, making another wider circle. This series provides its viewers with a delicious, dark, poignant murder mystery in seven parts written by none other than David E. Kelley, who created the great Peter Fonda and Ally McBeal, among many other strong, original, fearless shows.

Big Little Lies came to the screen when Reese Witherspoon and her producing partner Bruna Papandrea opted the novel by Liane Moriarty — an enterprise that has brought us both Wild and Gone Girl in 2014. Big Little Lies is, if anything, a longer, better version of both aforementioned, wildly successful films.

Witherspoon founded her company, Pacific Standard, to make film projects with women and about women, but what has resulted is far from exclusive and always above par. With the massive weight of Nicole Kidman, Laura Dern, Shailene Woodley and Witherspoon herself, this mini-series is unlike anything you’ve ever seen before. The opening credits are a work of art, the production value is extremely high, watching the series is a feast for the eyes. Set in California, on one of its most beautiful rugged coasts, the cinematography is minimalistic but slick without being overly stylized; things come to life in a way that I’ve never quite seen before.

The episodes unfold over a central mystery that is revealed in the very first episode: someone has been murdered at the school’s gala fundraiser. All the affluent and not-so-affluent families who covet positions in the town’s acclaimed school are present, and the subsequent episodes bring us into the lives of these families and characters who play such a vital role in the mystery of who ends up dead and why.

It is easy to see why the book will have appealed to Witherspoon: the characters for women are so varied and so nicely written that she must have practically salivated while reading Moriarty’s novel. And indeed, Witherspoon almost steals the show as Madeleine Martha Mackenzie, a feisty, impossibly single-minded, hilariously determined wife and mother who also has a gigantic heart. And side by side are Nicole Kidman as Celeste Wright, a high-powered lawyer turned trophy wife, Shailene Woodley as a newcomer to the town with a little boy in tow and dark past behind her, and finally, the great Laura Dern playing against type as a sharp corporate executive who is used to being the alpha among males as well as females.

What a show this is, both in terms of mystery and the evolution of character. If you haven’t seen it, then find it: it is almost compulsory viewing for anyone who loves a good story. This is a fine one, with unforgettable women, some wonderfully complicated dads, great children who actually come across as real little people instead of wooden types who are spoon-fed their lines, and a marvelous soundtrack to augment the love, tragedy, jealousy, fear, comedy, and drama that pervades this crazy, wonderful series.

We SWEAR: President Bidya Bhandari, Vice President Nanda Bahadur Bhandari and Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba preside over the oath-taking ceremony of new cabinet ministers in Kathmandu on Monday.

FROM KOREA WITH LOVE: South Korean Ambassador to Nepal Young Sik Park hands over a hygienic and first aid kit to a toddy-hit family in Ramshala Municipality in Chitwan on Monday.

TEEN WIN: Nepal’s U-19 cricket team celebrates its 7-wicket win over Singapore in the last group stage match of the Asian Cricket Council Under-19 Eastern Region Qualifiers in Malaysia on Thursday. With the win, the Nepal team has topped group A.

BP BIRTHDAY: Professor Abhi Subedi and Indian Ambassador to Nepal Manjeet Singh Puri after a talk organised by the Embassy of India to mark the 105th birth anniversary of BP Koirala at the Nepal-India Library in Kathmandu on Monday.

SPORTS STARS: Winners of the 14th edition of the Nepal Sports Journalists Forum (NSJ) Football Award in Kathmandu on Monday where footballer Kiran Kumar Limbu and badminton player Nangyal Devi Tamang were named male and female players of the year.
Friends in deed

NAMRATA SHARMA
in BANEK

Sita Thara lived with her large extended family of nine in Repti Sonari of Banke district in the western plains. The mud hut they lived in simply dissolved as flood waters rose last month. There is a gaping hole in the ground where her house once was, and the family has taken refuge in a nearby shed.

Sita and her neighbours (right) said the government provided them with one sack of rice, one packet of oil, and one tent. None of them fit in the tent and the food soon ran out. “How can a family of nine live in a tent, and in this heat?” she asked us.

So, instead of waiting for the government to send more help, the neighbours started helping each other rebuild their homes. Salvaging pieces of wood brought down by the floods, they have put up structures of mud and twigs.

Since the men are away working in the cities or abroad, it is the women who have ended up building the shelters. Sita is being helped by other women in the neighborhood. Using improvised tools, they carry the mud, and plaster it over the wooden walls. They have fashioned ladders to carry the mud cakes up the wall.

Purna Bahadur Chauhary remembers the waters rising at 3am on 12 August when his family of six were all sleeping. He woke them and took refuge in his sister’s house nearby just as his own house collapsed, washing away all their possessions.

He has received two sacks of rice, 3kg of lentils and one packet of oil from the government, as well as a small tent that is uninhabitable because of his family size and the heat.

Chauhary is also building a mud and wood hut for his family with support from neighbours. He thinks his village and surroundings suffered the sudden flash flood because embankments for the Sikta irrigation project dammed the waters.

It’s not the only one. “The embankment could be responsible for the flood that made so many homeless in Aghaiya village,” says Yadav Gyawali, a teacher at Nepal Rastriya Higher Secondary School. Local farmers are now demanding compensation from Sikta.

Sita, Purna and others belong to some of the poorest families in the western Terai, with meager possessions and a subsistence lifestyle. The floods have taken the little they had saved.

The government’s ‘door policy’ prevented donors from giving tarpaulins to needy families as they had to go through the Chief District Officer. But the government’s own aid is not enough, leaving the survivors caught in the middle.

Though it’s the responsibility of the Government to support the affected families during disasters, in Nepal this is often not the case. Commitments are made but immediate support does not fulfill the basic needs of disaster survivors. The slow-moving bureaucracies of the Nepali Government and donor agencies mean that aid, when it does arrive, is too little too late.

As Sita Thara and her neighbours have shown, at times of calamities it is best not to wait for the government but to start helping each other rebuild. The people of Banke have set a dramatic precedent by helping and sharing with those who have less.

Namrata Sharma
is a co-founder and editor of The Kathmandu Post, Nepal. More photos online.

Discounted return fares, starting from:

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Voting to heal past wounds

Local elections in Province 2 bring together candidates and voters from the hills and plains

RAMESHWAR BOHARA

Birganj was not just the epicentre of the Madhes movement in 2015, but also the city worst hit by the five-month long blockade.

This gateway to Nepal’s trade, and the only metropolitan city in Province 2, went to the polls last week. It has not yet fully recovered from the devastating economic impact of the blockade, and many businessmen are still struggling to pay the debts they incurred during the prolonged business slump.

In the final phase of campaigning for local polls on 18 September, Birganj is a microcosm of everything traditionally associated with elections in these parts: money, muscle, betrayal.

Ex-Minister Binod Srivastava was expecting a ticket from the Madhes-based RJPN to contest another term. But the party chose Rajesh Man Singh as its mayoral candidate, probably concluding that Srivastava’s political credentials alone would not suffice and that it needed someone with the power of both ‘money and muscle’.

Srivastava was Singh’s political mentor. Singh himself is from the Nepali Congress and a local contractor who hugely benefited from Srivastava’s political patronage and row as a youth leader, amassing wealth along the way. The RJPN saw Singh as more capable than Srivastava in elbowing out patrimonial, multilingual youth and hiring goons.

A day before nominations closed last week, Srivastava quit the RJPN, and Biju Ganchhap’s Nepal Loktantrik Forum fielded him as its own mayoral candidate for Birganj. The two will now be close rivals for the post.

Upendra Yadav’s Federal Socialist Forum Nepal (FSFN) has chosen businessman Bijaya Sarawagi, ex-president of the Birganj Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in recent months, Sarawagi has been telling friends and relatives: “I am sick of being extorted by every other political party. Now is the time to make a one-time investment in one party, win elections and stop paying off everyone.”

The Madhes-based parties, especially the RJPN and the FSFN, must win to prove to people in Province 2 support their demand for amending the Constitution, so they chose potential winners even if it means giving tickets to dubious candidates with iffy reputations.

The opposition UML, which successfully rode the nationalist (read anti-blockade) agenda in previous phases of local elections, has lost its edge in Province 2. Results are expected this month.
Youthful force

There is a buzz in the air across Province 2 ahead of elections on 13 September, and first-time voters are excited by the change. The young in the Tarai are energised about casting their ballots in the final phase of local elections. Many of them were too young to vote, or not even alive, when local elections last took place in 1997.

“Young people in the past were not directly involved in political activities but nowadays most of them are,” says Sudarsh Singh, a candidate of the RJP for Ward council in Janakpur.

Schools around Janakpur and across the Tarai are closing for a week for the polls, giving time for students to closely follow proceedings. “At the students will be involved in promoting the election, and campaigning for the parties who are up for election,” Singh tells THT.

In Birgunj, Neeta Nepal, 24, hopes that whoever is elected develops the city for the people, not just for themselves and their families. But she has her reservations.

“This is a huge mistake,” she said of elections. “We are happy it is happening after years and years, but each and every person knows that development is not going to happen. Candidates are making promises, of course, but we know that it is just to get votes. It is up to us citizens to choose the right person who can deliver.”

In Birgunj, the Maoists have fielded the youngest mayoral candidate in this phase of polls, 31-year-old Habibur Amari, probably because they are not hopeful about who is here. They are focused on competing with the UML along the East-West Highway.

Neeta Nepal, who recently won a local beauty pageant, says: “The youth are excited about voting in this election, but they are also wary of inexperienced candidates.”

Julia Thomas in Janakpur

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THE RACE IS ON: UML and FSPN’s mayoral candidates, Basuuddin Amari (left) and Bijaya Sarkar (centre, in green shirt with red scarf) are in the business. An exercise in optimism (or maybe, hype) was expected a zeker from the RJP, which chose to protest, Singh instead.

Amari, who has the backing of the controversial Basudebe Amari as its candidate for Birganj mayor. As an investor in the failed National Medical College here, his meteoric rise as a businessman is mysterious, and the media has linked him to underworld don Dawood Ibrahim. The way he is splurging money during this campaign has also raised suspicions about his sources of income.

Amari was initially close to the NC, but joined the Maoists to stop the content harassment from their trade union in his hospital. He defected to the UML last month.

Unlike the UML and Madhesi parties, the NC has fielded ever-loyal Ajaya Dhulbadi, its district president for Parsa, one-time deputy mayor and MP. The NC’s coalition partner, the Maoists, have fielded Abhishek Amari, a 31-year-old, foreign-educated Muslim, among the 23 candidates for the Birganj mayor post.
Dasain perks

As Dasain approaches, there are signs that things are creeping back to normalcy with the installation of centralised steel fencing at Blubber Mahal to force politicians not to make illegal U-turns. What a relief it is to see that there is still optimism in the Department of Roads that movers and shakers in this city can actually be forced to abide by traffic rules and drive on the right side, which of course is the left side, unless you are the Banepa Bus in which case you can knock down the metal barrier along the centerline in the wee hours just before breathing your last.

The other sign that the wheels of democracy are turning at their own inexorable pace is that Prime Minister Deuba IV has broken his own previous national record by inducting four new ministers to bring the total cabinet strength to 54. There are dark mutterings on the op-ed pages from chronic nameless, but Brave Lion has taken the bull by the horns because he knows that in a little more than a month his will be a caretaker government, and there is so much still left to be plundered but so little time to raise all it all.

Because of the size of this jumbo cabinet of wide-bodies there is standing room only at Singha Durbar. Many ministers don’t have offices with attached looms nor flagged SUVs, yet in the national interest they are willing to endure that extreme discomfort. We lead their sacrifice.

Despite that, the Minister of Short Supplies has hit the ground running to pick low-hanging fruit: he isn’t wasting time pursuing the elusive head of the Nepal Oil Corruption on his RoA Arab landscape to convert a national park buffer zone into a petroleum stocks depot, rather he has gone after Durbar Marg shops which threaten Nepal’s sovereignty and territorial integrity by selling pricey Reeboks. Minister should give himself a medal.

Now that the country is soon going to be federated, the Ass has finally figured out what a bunch of goons the framers of the new Constitution are. All seven provinces will have their own State Assemblies, governments, bureaucracies, tea-makers, orderlies, cronies and peas, which will create hundreds of thousands of new jobs, effectively ending the need for Nepalis to migrate for work abroad. That is called killing two birds with one stone in the bush.

Across town, MPs in the secret-to-be prorogued Parliament also know their days are numbered, so they are busy voting themselves Dasain bonuses. Reps in the August House have only till end-September to award themselves posthumous pensions so they can keep on enjoying legislative perks in the afterlife.

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