Power centre

In a month or so, when the new Parliament and seven state assemblies come into being, Nepal will join a list of countries ruled by federal governments. Parliamentary and provincial elections being held simultaneously in two phases (26 November and 7 December) will be the last step towards replacing Nepal’s absolute unitary state with a federal system.

But electing the Parliament and state assemblies does not necessarily ensure the kind of decentralisation that Nepal has long needed. As the director of The Asia Foundation Nepal, George Vaughan, argues in a commentary (page 4), those who ran and benefitted from the centralised system are desperately clinging to the status quo. It shows how difficult it is to change a mindset towards orchestrating governance and development from Kathmandu, he writes.

That each province will elect its own parliament from these polls is what makes them really historic. But no political party has come up with manifestos exclusively for provinces, and only a very few prominent faces are in the race to be in the state assemblies.

In every constituency, a parliamentary candidate is leading his (or her) party’s election campaign and provincial candidates are simply following along like sidekicks. This reveals the top leaders’ proclivity for the unitary setup, and how disinterested they are in real decentralisation.

Apart from 275 members of the new Parliament, 550 members of state assemblies will also be elected over the next two weeks. But the government is yet to choose provincial capitals and appoint state chiefs.

The weeks following the polls could be a window for the government to sort out all those logistical and technical issues. Even then, there will be hiccups. The biggest of them is the lack of authority accorded to provincial governments.

Kimhial Devkota, an expert on fiscal federalisation, says: “The centre has decentralised so little revenue rights that provincial MPs will not have money even to buy fuel.”

Devkota describes these elections as the last hurdle to cross before federalising the country, but warns that provinces will not survive without additional fiscal autonomy.

“Once these elections are over, we must revisit and review constitutional provisions about fiscal devolution,” he says. “Decentralisation of duties won’t suffice. We need to federalise fiscal rights as well.”

Om Astha Rai
UNCHARTED TERRITORY

This year, local, provincial and parliamentary elections may have deprived Nepal of a chance to move forward. But we will eventually do so – by building a better future. The first priority of the 550 members of the new assembly, who will be elected from the same three phases of polls this year, will be to set up and run local government. But they will also have to expedite reconstruction work. In the provinces where the 2015 earthquake and this year’s floods have taken a toll, provincial governments must expedite reconstruction and implement effective plans for disaster preparedness.

But local governments will have more instruments at their disposal than all the new chief ministers, state ministers and provincial ministers. Additionally, local elections must be conducted and held. These are the only instruments at the disposal of the people, as they have already been held, and most elected mayors and village council heads have already got into the full swing of reconstruction. When the earthquake hit central Nepal in April 2015, the Thavari river basin was one of the most affected districts. It is in the role of the local government to quickly distribute housing grants and to coordinate relief and reconstruction. It has been only a decade, and a half since a new electoral law was enacted, and it is time we moved forward. To the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) needed to be set up and to coordinate reconstruction work.

Yubraj Bhushal is the new CEO of the National Reconstruction Authority.
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T

To repeat an anecdote from an earlier column, in a southern African country some years ago, a friend was told excitedly by a Danish diplomat: “I am applying for Nepal as my next posting.”

“Why?”

“Because in Nepal you can get politically engaged like nowhere else.”

ON THE WAY UP
Kanak Marri Dixit

The Danish Embassy has evacuated from Nepal, but that exchange encapsulates the donor interventionism that has had society in its grip for much of the past decade. After the peace process began in 2006, Kathmandu’s political leadership allowed the Western embassies and agencies to engage in adventure in peace-building and constitution-writing, which delayed the first and delayed the latter. The more excitable among the donors engaged in “social engineering”, severely straining inter-

COMMENT
George Vaughan

Within the next two weeks, Nepal’s will complete constitution-making elections and hope to move on from an elongated, post-conflict transition to a period of stabilization. All parties to the elections must remain committed to the completion of the three electoral stages essential to the realization of a more stable, democratic Nepal.

Despite the increase in the numerical representation of women in government, from previous handouts to over 14,000 elected representatives now, the challenges of leadership are manifold: not only must these newly-elected women be accepted, they are also expected to perform at par or better.

Troublingly, with the exceptions of 10% of newly-elected deputy mayors, women and Dalits have been relegated to tertiary roles in local government.

It is apparent that the location of these new leaders in executive decision-making within local government has been deliberately maneuvered so that their inputs count for less. Political parties have done the minimum necessary, and grudgingly, to meet constitutional requirements. Sadly, a cursory glance of these electoral measures is the further marginalization of Dalit men in local government.

Despite such contrived handpicks, judicial commitments are now headed by mostly female deputy mayors should give us all hope that access to justice locally will improve. As women, and with previous experience in mediation, social mobilization, health, and community action, they come prepared more than their male peers to the representational task.

The opportunity exists, therefore, to design carefully targeted initiatives to take advantage of electoral success, even if it may appear to be mixed with systemic constraints at the outset.

The centre tries to hold
Diehard functionaries of a centralised, unitary state fight tooth and nail to preserve the status quo

Incoming ambassadors and donor agency heads have an opportunity to learn from the past.

community relations. Thankfully, the level-headedness of citizens (rather than good sense of the political and civic leadership) prevented a communal inferno. The final round of elections is dictated by the Constitution is about to happen, and Nepal is heading towards normalization after 20-year hiatus—a decade of conflict, another ten years of transition. One expects the incoming leadership in the donor agencies and embassies will be there to assist rather than obstruct.

With both India and China expected to be more aggressive in Kathmandu as they vie for influence, it is all the more vital for the others to support Nepal’s developmental efforts rather than be snared in geopolitical nets or the political whirlpool.

The course correction will not be easy, however. Embassies and donors agencies (including hybrid “dual-donor” entities) do not have strong institutional memory. And, barring exceptions, “national staff’s” prior to strike pre-existing prejudices.

The excessive distrust of the Kathmandu establishment that was refined by Sam Martin of the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) continues to be the leitmotif for agencies defining their programs and priorities. Martin’s deeply Tamil (Sambu) is today senior political adviser to the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, and hence one can expect some continuity to the international community’s overemphasized perceptions.
politics to us

On the whole, directly and indirectly, the legacy of UMLN has been to lengthen the peace process, complicate constitution writing, deepen communal divides and coddle the above-ground Malist system as it cheated on democracy and transitional justice. Hopefully, some day, a scholar with access to the UN Secretariat archives will set the record straight on UMLN.

UNMIN’s wake continues to justify the ship of state, as seen for example in the interventionist diplo-donors who acted so brazenly to try and prevent local government elections of the past year. While some of the involved individuals have thankfully departed, and at least one ambassador seems to have come around, there are still some souls who continue to act with impunity. Not least, the leadership of governance-focused basket fund administrators and multilateral provenance privileging advocacy of a single just cause while ignoring a myriad other just causes.

The suggestion to the new arrivals among diplomats, donor agency heads and INGO leadership would be: Nepali players (political and civic) have tossed up, and so have many of your immediate predecessors. Let us take credit where it is due (inclusion as part of the national discourse if not, as yet, reality; the new Constitution; elected local government; etc.) and focus on what remains to be done.

The urgent tasks now include ramping down inter-community polarisation; promoting transitional justice (including accountability for conflict are excesses) and human rights; challenging racketeering corruption; and developing independent civil society in the provinces.

The restructuring of the state is leading us into unknown terrain populated by districts, provinces and local municipalities. Nepal can come out as an exemplary experiment of local self-governments in South Asia if the national polity as well as the international community concentrate on implementing and improving the Constitution. But please, leave the ‘social engineering’ to Nepalis.

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Thanks to recommendations from its guests, Hyatt Regency Kathmandu has received the Service Excellence Award 2017, Asia and Australasia, presented by Luxury Travel Guide, the award recognizes the hotel’s continual efforts to provide high quality and unique service for its guests.

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The situation was tense. Trucks full of policemen descended on the town, as groups of local youth pelted stones at them. Some of us children made fires with black cloth and shouted slogans, mimicking the political activists. Elections followed, and there was a sense of euphoria. People were made to feel that they had won. The sense of achievement was passed down to the common people, and we children also felt it. Presently, as the limited democracy under the king was known, became a household term, even for us.

As I grew up, Nepal travelled a turbulent, but interesting, political journey. We lived through limited democracy, and another armed struggle that ended in an unfinished communist revolution at a time when communism was falling the world over. Finally we attained Loktantra democracy without the monarchy.

Nepal spent 30 years under the direct rule of the king in the name of the Panchayat system. Another decade and a half has already been invested in formalising an inclusive democracy without the monarchy. Through struggles, debates and conflicts, a clear political path seems to be finally emerging for Nepal. Elections say a lot about a society. In Nepal’s case, elections clearly display the imperfections of the political system. It makes sense to study the making of the elections in order to identify what our leaders and activists should be focusing on.

If we consider the agenda, the two elections for the Constituent Assembly were remarkable. Issues of identity, social inclusion and representation dominated campaigning in the first CA election, but the motor driving force was the need for peace. Nepal had experienced the pain of conflict for a decade, and they wanted an end to it at any cost. The Mantra were most suitably placed to cash in on that desire.

The second CA elections were a little different: issues of identity were already side-lined, and most the candidates focussed on local development. The first CA had failed, and the country had been operating under an interim Constitution for more than six years. Although the priority should have been constitutional issues, people were jaded, so the parties promised development instead.

Elections this year finally helped to realign the political focus from grand narratives to real issues. They also signalled an end to the uncertainty that characterised the transition period. Prosperity has peaked; was the common theme of the main political parties. Building upon the local elections, the present polls are also focusing on prosperity. This clear common agenda of all the political parties reflects the rising aspirations of the people. It also corroborates their rising economic status. The middle class in Nepal is growing fast despite the uncertain political era we have gone through.

Although there is a broad consensus on the need for prosperity, concrete details of policy shifts are rarely revealed by the major parties. How elections are being fought and won speaks a lot about how we will be governed for the next few decades.

We are hearing many parties promising without plans to support them. There is little or no culture of discourse or debate between the candidates, and there are no platforms for questioning them on policy issues. Even when debates are organised, candidates arrogantly do not turn up. This shows that leaders are not prepared to lead and as a result, people are hesitant to select them, knowing they are apt to take power for granted.

The forthcoming elections are the first under the new Constitution, and it’s probably too early to start debating about imperfections. But elections are at the centre of the whole democratic system: they institutionalise the transfer of power, set the entire process in motion and also create role models for society.

A political journey, of an individual, a party, a society or a nation, is literally walked from election to election. They shape the future of a country. Therefore it makes a lot of sense to make an extra effort now in order to safeguard our political future.

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Woman who moved mountains

Nisha Budha found her freedom, and hopes to free her sisters in Jumla as well

SMRITI BASNET

C

lad in a hefty down jacket and a pair of rugged jeans, Nisha Budha looks like an average Kathmandu urbanite. But she is anything but average. Born in a village near Jumla Bazar, Budha grew up in a family and community steeped in patriarchy, alcoholism, dated norms and taboos. The accumulation of these experiences led the 33-year-old to consciously make some bold decisions with the support of her family. Her father, a businessman, played an important role by educating all his six children. He took Nisha on trips to India where she gained exposure to a different world, learnt new languages and ways of living.

“I grew up always asking why can’t I respect tradition, but I knew there were things in Jumla that were very wrong,” said Nisha Budha, who is profiled in the documentary ‘Daughters of the Curved Moon’ that was screened at the Film South Asia documentary festival in Kathmandu recently.

Filmed over several years, the documentary is Budha’s coming-of-age story, as she returns to Jumla after six years of living and working as a trekking guide in Pokhara. The film follows the young woman as she questions age-old traditions, and tactfully provide her neighbours logical alternatives. Her progresiveness and no-nonsense approach to life are in stark contrast with the rigid mores of her home as she discusses sensitive issues like sexual health, menstruation and gender inequality.

Daughters of the Curved Moon was produced by Miranda Morton Yop and Sophie Dia Pegu who have successfully conveyed on screen Budha’s vivacious nature and contrast her childlike innocence with what it means to be a woman in Jumla even today. “My brother and I used to draw lots to see who would get to go with our father to India,” Budha told us during a break at the documentary festival. Her father enrolled her in a school in Chandigath, where she learnt the value of education the hard way. “I was a bad student in Nepal,” confides Budha recalling how she used to skip school and not pay attention to her studies. But in school in India, she was forced to mend her ways.

“If there is no education, there is nothing. It is dark without education,” she states. It breaks her heart to see many young women dropping out of school only to be married off by their parents. “Everyone keeps asking me when I am going to get married,” says Budha who has got used to dodging this question. After graduated from school, she returned to Nepal in 2016 and was determined to stand on her own feet. She joined an eco-tourism training organised by Empowering Women of Nepal which started by the trekking agency 3 Sisters in Pokhara. That is when she met Morton, who was impressed with her strength of character and commitment to social reform.

“I never knew Nepal was so beautiful. I felt proud as a trekking guide,” says Budha who has taken tourists to Everest and Annapurna Base Camps, Langtang, Upper Mustang, and Bars. Budha’s next goal is to see more and more women from her village become independent. For this, she has inherited the priority her father placed on sending children to school, and her belief that educating girls was the key.

Growing up from being a tough girl to a wise woman, Nisha Budha counts herself fortunate among women in Nepal, who are often trapped by traditions and taboos. She says: “My father used to tell me I would remember him after he was gone, and that is exactly what has happened.”

Now, she hopes to pass on the values and life lessons she has learnt to other women in Jumla and beyond.

COMING OF AGE

Work ‘Daughters of the Curved Moon’, a documentary recently put out by Nisha Budha’s 3 Sisters.
ALEX DUDLEY
in CHITWAN

Even before reaching Chitwan National Park, visitors to Nepal notice abundant imagery of the sanctuary’s most celebrated animal: the Greater One-horned Rhinoceros. It appears on posters at Kathmandu airport, a pair guards the steps of a temple that collapsed in the 2015 earthquake, and in Sauraha it is on hotel menus and woodcarvings for sale to tourists. Little wonder are the park’s most important attraction but rhinos often venture outside its boundaries, and a video of one roaming the streets of Sauraha at night has gone viral on YouTube.

The rhino has a place in Nepali culture: it is featured on a bank note and guides are new shorthand for Rs100.

In his book, The Soul of the Rhino, Hemanta Mishra says the main impetus for setting up Chitwan National Park was to conserve rhinos. Nepal’s secular political parties wanted to elevate the rhino as the national animal during Constitution drafting, but it lost out to the cow.

The combination of army patrols inside Chitwan and economic growth and enthusiasm of communities in the buffer zones has been credited with the near-zero poaching, and an increase of the rhino population from less than 100 at the end of the conflict in 1969 to 445 today.

But the lack of retaliation killings highlights the high priority Nepalis accord to safeguarding rhinos, such tolerance cannot be taken for granted.

Early warning through smart cameras could alert villagers of impending wild animal attacks, as has been done by conservationists in Kenya and India. Cameras there recognize and photograph incoming elephants, and then alert villagers through text messages.

Another mechanism to prevent human-animal conflict, already employed by Chisepo villagers outside Chitwan, is bee fences. First innovated in Kenya in 2012 to reduce crop-raiding by African elephants, these devices use honeybees to voraciously deter pests, produce honey for farmers and to pollinate crops. Conservationists have recently seen the need to enlist Chisepo villagers in the fight against poaching through youth-based patrols modeled on these long successful and long-rooted conservation policies. Translocation of rhinos from Chitwan to Bardia and Sunka Phanta National Parks has created insurance populations and allowed for the spreading of eco-tourism revenues in the Tarai.

The NTNC needs to more closely engage the public on translocation, highlighting the risk of cutting the country’s rhino population to one locale and the promise of reducing local crop destruction and human fatalities.

Nepal offers a beacon of hopes in the bleak landscape of international rhinoceros conservation. Yet with effective policing inside the parks and the elimination of domestic wildlife smuggling networks, the country could be a victim of its own conservation success story. More rhinos means greater chances of human encounters, and tension with Chisepo’s farmers could mount.

Nepal’s needn’t a radical departure from its current strategy, it just needs to strengthen community-based conservation mechanisms already in place while improving the efficiency of compensation for wildlife damage.

Alex Dudley has studied human-wildlife conflict in Tanzania’s Arusha National Park.

More rhino encounters

National park may be the victim of its own conservation success story
**EVENTS**

**Yala Newami,**
This exhibition by photographer Sam features a series of images of the people of Kathmandu. Gallery reflects the ancient and vibrant culture of the Newars.
14 November - 15 December, 5:30-7:30 pm, Hotel Mustang, Kathmandu Road, Patan. Entry: Free.
Info: (01) 5518569

**Tradition submerged,**
An exhibition that explores self-perception and gender identification while engaging viewers in a dialogue about urbanization, ecology, by artists Maia Tamukaku and Asha Das. 17 October - 13 November, 11am-8pm, Jativa Art Gallery.
Info: (01) 2518048, (01) 4660198

**Khabar Garaun 145,**
Come to the launch of the National Women Commission’s 145th edition Khabar Garaun 145, a 24-hour, free news talk. To be followed by literary sessions on various themes.
10 December, 11am-3pm, Nepali Administrative College (SAAN colleges, Jorpati).
Info: (01) 4254707

**Beyond Journals,**
A one-week exhibition featuring the creative world of Uma Pratap Bhattarai, where the art of journalism becomes an art of living.
26 November - 2 December, Minaa Kathmandu Showroom, Hotel Motel Managed
Info: info@nawapratap.org

**Music**

**Swing night,**
Make your weekend memorable at the Swing Night Tallagudi Concert.
25 November, 7:30pm, Hotel Madhuban
Info: (01) 4071593, 4917971, madhuban@hotel.com.np

**The Vesper House,**
Stop by for the best Italian and foot favourites, in breezy outdoor seating. Ask a great wine list for wine connoisseurs.
Poon: (01) 454719, www.vesperhouse.com

**Capital Grill,**
This American style dining offers a large assortment of appetisers and entrees to suit everyone’s taste.
BuddhaVille, (01) 480190, gerry@buddhaville.com

**Bubbly brunch,**
Book your table and enjoy Saturday brunch with friends and family for only Rs 525 per person (net). The amazing chauserma and puri won’t let you down.
Every Saturday. Tosh’s, Shobhna Garden and Club Sandimas, Shankhro Hotel

**Dining**

**Nabin at Trishara,**
Join us to your ace-restaurant singer, Nabin Kumar Bhattarai, perform live.
2 December, 7:30pm onwards, Trishara, Lainpur.
Info: (01) 441288

**Tatwa Live,**
Make your weekend memorable at Shambala Garden with a slate of live bands and live performances by Tatwa Swain, just Rs 820 per person (net).
Every Friday, Shobhna Garden and Hotel Shangri-La, (01) 442599

**Rupakot Resort,**
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Mandlov, Rupakot, (01) 622088 / (01) 4046667, 778900280, www.rupakotresort.com

**Mega Maui Serai,**
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Info: (01) 6977993

**Hyatt Regency,**
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Hyatt Regency Kathmandu, Boudha.
Info: (01) 6127524

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Shantipur, Nalega, (01) 460760, 4805137, info@atithiresort.com

**Tranquility Spa,**
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Info: www.tranquilityspa.com

**Chhaimale Resort,**
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Basundhara, (01) 4285810, 9815918489

**GETAWAY**

**Air Quality Index**

![Air Quality Index Chart]

KATHMANDU, 17-23 November

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The index gives you an idea of air quality in a region that is slightly better than last week. The concentration of pollutants less than 2.5 microns in diameter (PM 2.5), which are the most dangerous because they have large themselves in the lungs and can also enter the bloodstream, rose in the Tirathgarh red alert. This week, weekly summary graph of air pollution is a solid indicator of the improvements in Kathmandu, 2015.

For more information, visit: www.embassy.gov.np
A city whose temples and squares are part of the living culture, it pains 78-year-old Mohan Maiya Basu that no one is coming to offer prayers at the Bhaidega temple in the southwest corner of Patan Durbar Square. Basu's family has been performing the ritual worship at the Shiva temple for generations.

While devotees throng nearby temples, hardly anyone worships the structure at the edge of the square. The temple has also been largely forgotten by Gachi Sanathan, the agency responsible for supporting festivals and cultural activities. Bhaidega is a story of why it is important to preserve physical monuments in order to save Kathmandu Valley's intangible heritage.

The temple is now being restored based on the original three-based papalo design, and Basu is hopeful that the temple's importance will also be restored. “People will come to pray and maybe there will even be a huge mela during Seawon Monda days dedicated to Shiva,” he says.

Unlike other temples in Patan’s palace square, which were built by royals, Bhaidega was erected in 1678 by a commoner, Bhagwati Bihari, who rose to become part of the city’s nobility. It commemorated the Shiva temple at Kashi Vishwanath in Varanasi that was destroyed on the orders of Moghul emperor Aurangzeb nine years earlier. Bhaidega was the second tallest temple in the square before it collapsed in the 1934 earthquake. While many of the others were restored to their original form, Bhaidega was ironically rebuilt in the Moghul style due to its architectural style.

“We felt the need to go back and restore the temple because so much of the ambience of the Kathmandu town was lost as we needed to manage to rebuild everything in 1934,” recalls Kamal Muni Dixit, vice-chairperson of the Cultural Heritage Preservation Group that was formed by a group of citizens to rebuild the temple. “It needed to go back to its original form, not only out of respect towards the person who built it but also for the people who have appreciated that temple through the centuries.”

Reconstruction had started on 26 February 2013, exactly two months before the earthquake.

With assistance from well-wishers, conservation architects, historians and activists, the group located photographs of the temple in the collection of Felix Brandt in Germany. Taken around 1930, they helped provide a sense of the size and original design of Bhaidega.

Carved wooden doors, pillars and windows from the temple were discovered in the Patan Museum store room, and a detailed watercolour of the woodwork of the first-floor strut, made by Henry Oldfield in 1853, helped confirm they belonged to the temple and provided a guide for the new woodwork. Rebuilding slowed after the 2015 earthquake as attention was divided, but the interruption was also an opportunity to build back better, says conservation architect Rohit Ranjitkar. “Before the earthquake, plans were to rebuild on the existing foundation and pitch but after the earthquake we investigated the foundation and strengthened it as well. If small interventions and improvisations make it safe, why not do it,” Ranjitkar told us.

Reconstruction is staying as true as possible to traditional methods, using wood, mud and bricks, while ensuring that the temple is structurally sound. Foundation work is now complete and the carved doors of the ground floor have been installed. “Times have changed and we don’t have gathis like before to carry on maintenance from time to time. Moreover, resources, skills and knowledge are getting scarce so we need to plan for long-term,” says Ranjitkar.
I halfway through watching Atomic Blonde, the new, slick, action-filled, visceral, Charlize Theron vehicle, you feel a bit of déjà vu it is because the film is basically a remake of John Wick (2014), the Keanu Reeves instrument that revived his career as an action hero a few years ago; tailoring his talents to what the man is best: a blank face with the astonishing ability to turn grueling fights into balletic set pieces. Directed by David Leitch, who was an un-credited, co-director for John Wick, Atomic Blonde is a fast, fun, and completely explosive, MUST SEE, Sophia Pande.

The object of the mission – one that makes Broughton go atomic – is the recovery of a list taken from a murdered MI6 agent that, of course, has the name of every Western agent in the Soviet Union. Everyone is out to get it, for various purposes, and Theron’s motivations come into doubt as well when a double agent named Satchel is thought to be concealed within this now notorious list.

Theron is spectacular as Broughton, an elegant, hard as nails weapon with a bit of heart. Her character is totally flat, but her persona is not, with the same incredibly stylish construction that made Reeves’ John Wick so very popular. Atomic Blonde was barred from theatres in Nepal by the censors due to its extreme, exhilarating action sequences, but also due to the prudishness of those who think that a lesbian love scene is somehow more “risqué” than a straight one. One can only imagine the looks on the faces of the censors while watching this wild, unapologetic film – but since you can choose for yourself as an adult, a decision that was, unfortunately, taken out of our hands, you can now make up your own mind. Theron has set the tone for female action heroes without conceding her femininity. Now it remains to be seen if she herself and several others can follow and hold up in the footsteps of this particular, explosive, riveting, startlingly memorable blonde.

Theron has set the tone for female action heroes without conceding her femininity. Now it remains to be seen if she herself and several others can follow and hold up in the footsteps of this particular, explosive, riveting, startlingly memorable blonde.
Ramesh Kumar in Jhimal Khadupati, 19-25 November

Two Grade A building contractors, who have won tickets from the NC and UML parties to contest parliamentary elections in Rasuwa district, brought local public transport to a virtual halt last month when they hired hundreds of vehicles to ferry their supporters to the Election Commission to register their candidacies.

Since then, NC’s Mohan Acharya and UML’s Janardan Dhakal have tried to oust each other by holding huge election rallies and organizing lavish feasts for cadres every day.

Rasuwa’s polls exemplify how expensive elections have become in Nepal. In this sparsely populated mountain district candidates have spent millions of rupees to flex their muscles to try to win votes.

It is difficult to predict how much will be spent in this year’s parliamentary and provincial elections, scheduled for 28 November and 7 December. The government, political parties and contributors have set aside about Rs6 billion. But this figure does not include the money that individual candidates are clandestinely spending to win votes. Economist Keshar Acharya estimates that about Rs100 billion will be spent openly and secretly on these elections.

The EC has fixed ceilings of Rs4.5 million and Rs1.5 million for parliamentary and provincial candidates respectively. If all the 1,945 parliamentary candidates stick to the EC ceiling, they will spend nearly Rs1.6 billion. Another Rs8 billion will be spent by the 3,249 provincial candidates, if they do not exceed the ceiling.

Yet, it is an open secret that most candidates, especially potential winners, will spend much more than permitted. Picking together information collected from candidates, party functionaries and supporters, it would be safe to say that candidates, including those vying for proportional representation seats, will spend Rs10 billion.

By comparison, the EC has a budget of more than Rs80 billion, and the government is spending Rs10 billion for security.

Candidates spending such a huge amount of money in a short period of time could have short-term positive impacts on election results, but it could eventually weaken democracy.

Poor and principled politicians will be overwhelmed by the sheer weight of money. It is not a constitutional obligation to appoint this many ministers. But it is most likely that there will be many aspirants, all piling tremendous pressure on the Prime Minister and chief ministers to become part of the cabinet.

More ministers mean a bigger burden on the state exchequer and it will be a challenge for the central and provincial governments to manage financial resources.

Election economy

IGNORANT OF THE WEEK

"It is not compulsory for the Madhesi to be part of Nepal forever"

The election manifesto of the Rastra Janata Party, Nepal, as reported by nepalifm.com, 23 November.

135 ministers

Bhagwan Khadka in Kisoro Dahi, 22 November

KAHAR

If you are annoyed by a junior cabinet, get ready to be distressed: Nepal may have as many as 135 ministers after the elections.

Up to 25 MNAs (25% in the federal Parliament and 55% in seven state assemblies) will be elected in the two rounds of parliamentary and provincial polls on 26 November and 7 December.

As per the new Constitution, the Prime Minister cannot appoint more than 25 ministers in the federal setup, so the federal cabinet will not be as big as it now. But there will be more ministers in provincial governments. "The Constitution allows a chief minister to appoint up to 20% of the members of state assemblies as ministers. So even chief ministers could appoint as many as 110 ministers." Pradesh 5, which includes Kohima Valley, could have the most ministers (22), followed by Pradesh 27. The lowest number of ministers will likely be in Pradesh 6.

It’s not a constitutional obligation to appoint this many ministers. But it is most likely that there will be many aspirants, all piling tremendous pressure on the Prime Minister and chief ministers to become part of the cabinet.

More ministers mean a bigger burden on the state exchequer and it will be a challenge for the central and provincial governments to manage financial resources.

RESPONSE

"I recommend Sensodyne."

- Dr. Sabith Golar, dentist practising in the UK.
Voting amidst the ruins

Elections further delay earthquake reconstruction

In Kavre, engineering and forwarded for a green light from the local ward office.

"The ward chair is busy with elections, but it should not be an excuse when it comes to compensating quake victims like me," lamented Paudel.

Several other families in Paudel's ward also haven't received their second instalment, and 34 families never even got their first.

In the past, reconstruction work was delayed due to government negligence, mismanagement and frequent changes of the CEO at the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA). Now, the elections are also delaying rebuilding.

NRA CEO Govinda Pokharel stepped down from his post to vie for a parliamentary seat in Pyuthan, and it will take time for his replacement, Tulsikrishna Thapa, to master the NRA's files. Annual will be the agency's fourth CEO in two years. Meanwhile, many quake survivors are bunkering down for a third winter in tents.

Enakii Paudel, who heads Paudel's Ward 8 in Mandu Dusup municipality, told Nepal Times his ward's has increased three fold because of the upcoming polls.

"As of now I am not just the head of the ward. I have election-related multiple responsibilities and I am not able to find time to look after the reconstruction process," says Paudel.

The fourth in a series of reports by The Asia Foundation, Aid

Information gap slows

Life is slowly improving for many Nepalis whose homes were destroyed or damaged in the 2015 earthquakes but there are notable exceptions and, overall, major uncertainty about the reconstruction process.

These findings are based on the fourth in a series of surveys conducted by The Asia Foundation in April 2017, which were published in October. The first round of research was done in June 2015, the second in February-March 2016, and the third in September 2016. The 4th survey interviewed nearly 4,854 respondents in 11 earthquake-affected districts.

It found that, under the Nepal Rural Housing Reconstruction Program (NRHHP), 49% of people in earthquake-affected areas were receiving relocation or reconstruction assistance compared to just 5% in September 2016. Seventy-four percent were living in their own homes, compared to 52% right after the earthquakes.

However, most of the people surveyed stressed that some groups were lagging behind. "The marginalized — low caste, low income groups, widows and the disabled — and those who live in more remote areas are more likely to remain in shelters and have found it much harder to move home," said the report.

The survey also found that political parties had virtually ceased their support for rebuilding, although they were increasingly busy with elections at the local level. 59% of people in all affected districts were dissatisfied with local political parties' assistance with disaster relief, according to the report.

By April 2017, nearly all of those who
CASH TO REBUILD
Total number of households destroyed in the earthquake eligible for government grants. Those who have not received the first, second and third installments of the promised Rs300,000 so far.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Installment</th>
<th>Eligible (Rs 50,000)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st tranche</td>
<td>Rs 20,000,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd tranche</td>
<td>Rs 10,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd tranche</td>
<td>Rs 10,000,000</td>
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The report recommends finding ways to continue reconstruction while the Election Code of Conduct is in force for the provincial and federal elections.

The ongoing campaign for provincial and parliamentary elections has affected the reconstruction process in many ways, yet none of the political parties has included reconstruction in their election manifestos—proving once more the apathy and neglect of earthquake victims by the political leadership.

Rudra Malla of the NRA office in Siddhipulchok is now deployed at the election office. He says he hasn’t seen any parties talk about reconstruction during their campaigning in the district.

Other rebuilding work is also at a standstill, he explains. “It is difficult to start any new arrangement with development partners, even if they want,” says Malla, adding, “at the same time people don’t want to go for masonry or other training because the election campaigns are like carnivals.”

New NRA CEO Bhushalkark says that the overall delay in reconstruction has been caused by elections. “The real reason is the structural problem of the NRA,” he told us, admitting that poll campaigning could have distracted people from rebuilding.

Bhushalkark notes that hiring insufficient engineers was the biggest reason for the NRA’s past delays. “I have ensured that the new 5,000 engineers are hired on the basis of merit and will perform their best,” he said. (See Guest Editorial, page 20.)

Asking about providing shelter to quake victims this winter, he shared an ambitious plan to train 54,000 masons and carpenters in the next two months, and to move 60% of private households to safer homes within six months.

Many of the victims in the 14 earthquake-affected districts have heard such promises before.

and Recovery in Post-Earthquake Nepal, reveals that quake victims feel that preparations for the local elections earlier this year affected reconstruction. (See below)

“The main impacts were the temporary suspension of the distribution of reconstruction cash grants, NRA’s grievance management and NGOs’ and INGOs’ work,” the report notes. Released in October and based on surveys of earthquake-affected households in April 2017, the

reconstruction

were eligible for the RIRP grant had received the first installment; the survey found. Most of them found it easy or somewhat easy to access the first tranche. However, taking the next step was more difficult for many.

While reconstruction of private houses started to progress significantly in late 2016,” the report says, “it had slowed down again by early 2017 due to labor shortages, high prices for construction labor and materials, high transportation costs and delays in the inspection process, and the disbursement of the second installment of the housing reconstruction grant.”

In fact, many households that received the first tranche did not, or did not plan to, use the money to rebuild. Only 37% of people said in April that they would use the grant for the intended purpose of building a new house using an approved, safe model, a drop from 64% in September 2016.

Houses are concerned about timelines and the requirements needed to receive the second installment of the housing grant. People also lack information on procedures, requirements and technical standards, which has delayed the ability of people to take informed decisions about rebuilding.

Marty Logan

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Wildlife diplomacy

Birds in mission-dominated headlines this past week were several items of news that did not get the attention they deserved. The first was the bomb threat at the Supreme Court on Tuesday that delayed the prosecution of the 44th Bennet Restaurant & Bar.

But if you read the fine print, you’d have noted that the threat was made from a landline to the Supreme Court toll-free number by a guy who said he had meticulously planted three bombs in the court premises that will go off at 2:15.

The other item, which bagged the first Runner-up award in the interesting News Category, was that Nepal has now attained self-sufficiency in egg production. As a country that has never been under a foreign yoke, it is good to know that hereafter we also need not rely on others.

The third item that caught the least attention this week was the Dalia Lama (please be upon him) fasting and raising doubts about the true Buddha being born in Nepal. The likelihood of 144-lasso-mess being allowed to visit Lumbini, a town even more remote, even god-men need diplomatic skills, and till the 36 could bear a thing or two from Nepal’s mastery of the art of wildlife diplomacy.

One of the reasons Nepal was never colonized was because the British weevils and emperors were allowed to hunt tigers and rhinos to the brink of extinction. Later, we dispatched large numbers to exchange for hydropower plants and other infrastructure. There have been glitches, like the time a few years ago when a turtle named ‘Rumur’ that was being shipped to Japan was nearly not allowed to travel because he had on him a horn that would have technically made him a traffic offender in wildlife corridors.

Nepal’s colossus diplomacy, however, has not led us up to full potential. We have a lot more animals we could chip off to return for stuff. The urban zebra is an endangered species in many developed countries. Nepal has a surplus. The law of supply and demand dictates that we export the entire cohort of Kothimla to a new-offshore country like Norway. As our own ambassadors in exchange for salmon and red herrings.

There’s a time when the common housefly, which has been wiped out in Europe but of which we have swarms in Shimla’s By Pass Stop Tea Shop, ready for translocation. The pack of howling dogs that defend the neighbourhood trash heap can all be sent off to South Korea where dogs are regarded as man’s best food. Not to be outdone, this Ass also offers itself up as ambassador and plenipotentiary in any country Malta seems fit.

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