Last lavish lap

By successfully holding the first phase of parliamentary and provincial elections early this week, and gearing up for the last phase next week, Nepal is now on the final lap leading to full promulgation of the new Constitution.

As Election Day draws closer, candidates appear to be growing anxious and are doing — or promising — anything that voters might want to hear. They are trying to outdo each other in wooing swing voters, and win power.

This week, a rightist group advocating for restoration of Nepal as a Hindu nation held separate meetings with NC President and Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and UML Chair KP Oli.

Both leaders reportedly promised to address the outfit’s concerns, hoping to win its support.

In Parsa district’s constituency 3, where people suffered a devastating flood in August caused by Indian embankments, voters asked NC parliamentary candidate Ramesh Bajal if he would be able to raise the issue with India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

“Why not? I replied, folding his hands and flashing a smile to greet voters (see pic above).

Most voters are smart enough to figure out if their candidates are lying. And contenders also know that their empty promises will not really work — so some candidates are even distributing cash, booze and goods.

In the Marchewar area of Rupandehi district this week, police seized a truckload of bamboo being smuggled into Nepal probably by a candidate to woo swingable voters.

In Bhairahawa, UML supporters accused RPP candidate Iljap Bobas of erecting electricity poles at his own expense to influence voters — a charge rejected by the RPP.

Former Chief Election Commissioner Nihalika Tipyati urges people to choose candidates wisely, as their decisions could be instrumental in shaping the country’s future. “Voters should realize that they are also partly responsible for bad governance,” he says. “So they have to vote for parties and candidates who can safeguard democracy, bring prosperity and deliver stability.”

He adds: “If the voters fail, the country will fail too.”

Working women

PAGE 8-9

Voters’ vow

Neither bullets nor cynicism will deter people from delivering their political verdict

By OM ASTHANA RAI

PAGE 14-15

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A 10-year war to rebuild Nepal ended in 2006, and the country has been working hard to rebuild itself. The elections were a test of the country's ability to make progress, and the results were mixed. The main parties did not gain as many seats as they had hoped, and there were concerns about the country's ability to move forward.

The elections were a test of the country's ability to make progress, and the results were mixed. The main parties did not gain as many seats as they had hoped, and there were concerns about the country's ability to move forward.
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A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER
Banking on connectivity

Our collective prosperity depends on first turning our hard borders into soft ones

When the Malla rulers and their skillful artists of Kathmandu were busy supervising the construction of the Nyatapola temple at Taumadhi Square, the British were busy setting up the Bank of England and Yale University was being established in the United States.

However, 315 years after the great five-storey temple was built, Kathmandu still cannot get permission from the government to establish the University of Bhaktapur. The historical city has a very high rate of school attendance, and the Khepa College, attended by students from 66 districts across Nepal, is known for its quality. Awareness that we have been late in opening universities and financial institutions is one thing, but here in 2017 to miss taking full advantage of Nepal’s connectivity to the Indian and Chinese economies is sad, laughable and something we can never forgive ourselves for. While Europe was going through the industrial revolution, we had the Rana oligarchy ruling in Nepal. While Mao and Nehru were laying the base for strong economies in China and India, we had the partyista Panthayat system. When the whole world was taking advantage of information technology and the dot com economy, we were in the middle of an armed conflict. All were missed opportunities, but we cannot miss hitching our wagons to the fast-growing economies of our giant neighbours to the north and south.

The election manifestos of political parties in this week’s elections have become a source of ridicule among voters. The parties have failed spectacularly to win the hearts, minds and pockets of the Nepali people. But if we are to focus on taking advantage of the economic growth in our neighborhood, the promises they have made may suddenly be attainable.

For this, Nepal must divert its efforts from working its diplomatic charm in Beijing or New Delhi to concentrate on Laos or Lhasa. We must focus first on the neighboring states within our neighbouring countries, build trust so we can trade, and profit once again. After all, as they say, “We can choose our friends, but we cannot choose our neighbours.” Nepal’s future prosperity will depend on how well we get along with Tibet, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Sikkim and Uttarakhand.

This cultural landscape did not always consist of hard borders. Ram travelled all the way from Ayodhya to Janakpur to compete for the hand of Janak’s daughter Sita. She was later kidnapped and trafficked to Lanka and subsequently rescued with the help of a Monkey Army.

Buddha was born in Lumbini in Nepal and then travelled all over present day north India and passed away (attained Parinirvana) in Kushinagar in Uttar Pradesh. Birth was married to the king of Tibet succeeded in converting him, and Tibet, to Buddhism.

Long before all this, Manjushree from Wu Tai Shan of Shaolin China travelled to and desired the lake to start the first human settlement in Kathmandu Valley. Atikico later went to Manjushree’s home village in China and built a great stupas that stands to this day. We do not know if the Dalai Lama stopped in Lumbini as he escaped from Tibet to seek refuge in India. All this was long before modern passports, visas and immigration-check points. Even in those days borders must have been clear and respected. We need to learn from the past and act for a prosperous future. Trust among neighbors is low and the capitals where destinations are made are far apart. We need to take the lead at ground level, where trade and people-to-people contacts actually take place.

We did not have Superman, Spiderman or Batman but Hanuman flew to the Himalayas to find a life-giving herbal potion for Laxman, Ram’s younger brother. He could not find the plant, so instead carried back the whole mountain top. Our collective prosperity depends on connectivity and the first step is to turn our hard borders into soft ones.

Anil Chitrakar is President of Siddharthini, and writes this column Half Full at Nepal Times every fortnight.

Celebs join in

Manisha Koirala, Rajesh Hamal and Sunil Thapa are joining Malcolm McDowell, Michael Imperioli, Scott Glenn, Nuno Bettencourt, Chris Adler, Reinhold Messner, and many more, to drive 10 donated fire engines from Birganj to Kathmandu. The Nepal Fire Truck Expedition will be crowd funded. To learn more visit https://expedition.koboldwatch.com.

Yeti drill

Yeti Airlines has donated its retired BAE Systems’ piston-engine aircraft to the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal at Gautam Buddha Airport in Bhairahawa. It will be used for fire rescue and emergency evacuation training drills.

Cakes galore

Hindu Shivaratri is celebrated by people of various religions. People make cakes which are given to sages for blessings during this festival.
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Returning to Chitwan
Nature has reclaimed Tiger Tops, once Asia’s best wildlife lodge

Kurt Russell, back early from an Antigua trip. The peaceful setting was swept clean of wild animal tracks for the glitzy marriage of Pamela Bellwood with Nik Wheeler. Jim’s photojournalist friend: “I have been best Man at every one of his weddings.”

On this patch of ground, I stood 30 years ago by the elephant-leading platform with first-born Sangaji on my hip, his little head coyly in a blue woollen cap, when he spoke his very first word — not mama or papa but hatt (elephant), pointing a tiny finger at the huge grey bulk, prophesying his life and career associated with pachyderms. Another moment in Surug when we unintentionally cornered a tiger — with a heart-stopping roar it charged out of the foliage with baby Khancho sleeping tightly clasped on my knee, scowling at what seemed like the very last moment into the undergrowth. Khancho didn’t even wake. And here in the dilapidated elephant camp lines where my toddler son so loved to hang out, Khancho bands on hips indignantly admonished me: “They may be stuff to you, Mum, but they are MY FRIENDS!”

Tigers have come and gone as the best wildlife lodge in Asia. Tourists now walk with elephants rather than ride them, jungle jeeps are specially sprung and towed, and some firebreaks and lodges are operating on the Park perimeters. The loss of the lease concession in the Chitwan national parks was the end of Nepal’s reign as Asia’s best wildlife destination. But still the Narayani River flows liquid silver as the red sun sinks behind the hazy horizon, and the ancient rhythm of jungle life endures. A rhino ruminates in the long grass, feeding for an evening drink and at my feet deep tiger pug marks impressed into the riverbed mud, tirelessly imprinted by generations of Chitwan’s big cats.

The thick green forest is patterned with tangled creepers clinging tree trunks, crocodile back and familiar wild animal scents. On, our drive was a riot of wild flowers, a broth of butterfly, a mesmerizing affair, and a marsh mucker slides into the air, hanging like a dream just beneath the cloudly green surface.

Endless monsoon floods have cleared the forest floor and forged new watercourses — I hardly recognised Daksh Khola — but many moons ago a big male leopard and I had startled each other as I drove by the guilty. Wasn’t this the pond where our small son, terrified, had locked a crocodile whilst on an innocent illicit fishing expedition? And down this steep bank a tigeress defending her cubs had roared at my brother Nick, giving him and his guide the fright of their lives.

I have not worked in Tiger Tops since 1997, but visited often until 2012, when all the lodges inside the protected area were closed by the government. The organic nature of change is reclaiming the lodge: its roofs patch ragged, crumbling walls peeling, and black tarps falling from the tall palm-trunk and disintegration. Moss now grows on the empty steps where we had so often stood in our jungle green, greeting elephant safari friends and guests. The silent dining room, with every table still framing the dusty bar, once rang with chatter, laughter and stories of the day’s wildlife encounters. Neglected lawns, once trod on by the likes of Hillary Clinton, Robert Redford, Mick Jagger and many more. Prince Phillip strode past the British press corps, gathered respectfully on the now-naked stone balcony. “Good morning Sir”, they called cheerfully. The Prince gawped: “I was”, he barked, “until I saw you lot!” before joining King Birendra and Jim Edwards waiting politely on the lawn.

Princess Anne famously fired her private secretary whilst on a Chitwan elephant safari. Henry Kissinger stood on these decaying wooden stairs, paralysed by vertigo and unable to step down into the howdah — instead I took him on a jungle drive. Zig Birovitskii helped dart an injured tiger that had turned man eater, and Jimmy Carter posed with tiny Timothy Edwards in his arms. We stage-managed Robert Redford’s activities to avoid crossing jungle paths with Goldie Hawn and her husband
In his new book, pioneering British neurosurgeon Henry Marsh ponders the end of his own life and his work in Nepal and Ukraine.

In Dervetka’s native Gdów, it is a formidable undertaking, carrying equipment to run operating theatres, laboratories and a pharmacy. Here the atmosphere is a curious mix of a small hospital and a country fair. Some patients, with serious ailments, have walked for days to make it to the clinic.

On the Anapa Cancer Circuit trek with his son, Marsh reminisces about his own life, his complicated first marriage and the lives of his parents, how his unrequited first love led to a failed suicide attempt and his dropping out of Oxford but ultimately to his improbable career as a neurosurgeon.

His father, Norman Marsh, was an eminent lawyer who, with his mother, was involved in the creation of Amnesty International. He fears he too will suffer from dementia like his father, or other serious ailments. Marsh keeps a ‘suicide kit’ of a few lethal drugs at home but is not sure if he would ever dare to use it. As the Romanian-French writer Emil Cioran said: ‘Without the possibility of suicide, I would have killed myself long ago. Marsh doesn’t go that far but he does feel that, if need be, he can end his sufferings and provide him some solace.

He takes the obliging elephant ride in Bilasv. ‘Joe’, the Nepali elephant gave him, with its red-rimmed eyes ‘was of deep and infinite resignation’. That sense of ‘sad resignation’ sometimes washes into this book, which is always thoughtful, and often wise.

NIRAJ SHRESTHA

How he first thought of going to work in Nepal after retirement

While I can ride the mare, I suddenly remembered a young Nepali woman with a cap in her hair that had been slowly parrying her legs. I had operated on her two months previously. The op turned out to be osteosarcoma, a rare infection common in impoverished countries like Nepal but almost unheard of in England. She had returned to the outpatient clinic a few days earlier to thank me for her recovery, like so many Nepalis, she had the most perfect, gentle manners. As I ran – it was late summer, the next level was sox and the dark green water of the Thames seemed to be almost motionless — I thought of her and then thought of Dew, Nepal’s first and foremost neurosurgeon, more formally known as Professor Upen德拉 Devkota. We had been friends and surgical trainees together in London thirty years ago. “Why thought? Perhaps I can go to Nepal and work with Dew. And I will see the Himalayas.”

Excerpts from Admissions

Life as a Brain Surgeon by Henry Marsh

Thomas Dunne/St Martin’s, 271 pp. $36.99

A few days earlier, to thank me for her recovery, like so many Nepalis, she had the most perfect, gentle manners. As I ran – it was late summer, the next level was sox and the dark green water of the Thames seemed to be almost motionless — I thought of her and then thought of Dew, Nepal’s first and foremost neurosurgeon, more formally known as Professor Upen德拉 Devkota. We had been friends and surgical trainees together in London thirty years ago. “Why thought? Perhaps I can go to Nepal and work with Dew. And I will see the Himalayas.”

The English Surgeon

In his new book, pioneering British neurosurgeon Henry Marsh ponders the end of his own life and his work in Nepal and Ukraine.

Henry Marsh began his 2014 memoir Do No Harm with a startling confession: “I often have to cut into brains and it is something I hate doing.” Honest and spurring to a fault, he recounted his failures, which still haunt him, rather than his much more numerous successes. Now retired from the British National Health Service, Marsh’s new work, Admissions, looks inwards: pondering the end of his own life, and reconnecting his post-retirement work in Nepal and Ukraine.

In Kathmandu, he works with his friend Upen德拉 Devkota (“Dew”), a fellow trainee in London 30 years ago, at the Neurop Hospital in Baneshwor. It finds a city still trying to find its feet a year after the 2011 earthquake.

There is a reawakening, a directness to life here, with intense and brilliant colors, which was lost in wealthy countries a long time ago,” he writes.

Nepal “is a tragic mess... the politics of the country is largely the politics of patronage and corruption” and yet “as an outsider, it is almost impossible not to fall in love with the land and its people.”

Working in Nepal can be both exhilarating and frustrating. Most patients come with outsized expectations “hoping for an instant cure and with an exaggerated faith in medicines, perhaps connected to their belief in prayer and sacrifice.” Due to poor primary care, brain tumours are much larger than in the West and treatment is more difficult and dangerous. And yet, the surgeons are under tremendous pressure to operate even though the patient will end up in a vegetative state or worse.

‘Only in America have I seen so much treatment devoted to so many people with such little chance of making a useful recovery,’ he muses.

Marsh mutes at Upen德拉 Devkota single-handedly establishing and running a world-class hospital, and his relentless pace of work: “Dew does almost all the major operating himself. In six weeks in Kathmandu, I saw more major operations than I would have done in six months in London.” he adds.

Neurop Hospital’s outpatient clinic is full of doctors, receptionists, relatives and patients and Devkota is like a king surrounded by courtiers and petitioners.

Marsh also ventures out of Kathmandu to a free health camp.
Working women

PORTRAITS by SANJOG RAI

As his father retired from service in Singapore and Sanjog Rai returned to Nepal, he dabbled in journalism. But he found his true calling in photography, especially in making travel with portraiture. He set up his own commercial photography company, Abstract Studios, to earn a living. During assignments, he started working on images that really stood out for the stories they told.

All started with a chance meeting with Jemsha Shrestha at JCI, who makes lehka paper. The light was fantastic and the portrait came out really well. Rai thought of making the photo part of a series on working women, and wherever he travelled in Nepal, wherever he started working on portraits of women, it was never hard to find them working.

Rai was enamoured with travel photography he saw in Nepal. "I had seen the cracked blacks and perversely blemished, and I wanted to put a new challenge to myself, besides there were all these stories just waiting to be told," he says.

Rai wanted to show the extraordinary lives of ordinary women through pictures. So far he has taken just 12 portraits; his goal is 50, enough for an exhibition.

"I only work on one portrait per day," says the 33-year-old. "I will be happy if even one of the hundreds of pictures I take every day comes out well. If more than one comes out well, I get surprised."

Rai also wanted to challenge existing perceptions about a workplace. It is not always an office or a cubicle. It can be anywhere and everywhere, under an open sky or across a mustard field.

"Not every photograph has to be a life or death story. Everyone’s struggle doesn’t have to be a reality show, but I wanted to shoot it cinematically without fetishising the poverty,” Rai adds.

He shoots with basic equipment: DSLR, kit lens, a studio light and a couple of friends to help out. He says: “I try not to hide anything if possible. Often times the only edit I do is to make sure the story is as it should be.”

Sanjog Nepal, for example, is working in construction but was actually once trained as a filmmaker. She spent seven years fighting a court battle against the father of her son so she could get Nepali citizenship.

Rai met Kattu Gurung in Kagbeni while she was tending her mountain goats to high pasture. But he only got a shot because by the time he got the photo shoot ready she had disappeared up the mountain.

Sanjog Rai’s road stretches to the horizon, and he says he will keep taking portraits of working women he meets along the way. nepalinetimes.com

For more pictures go online.
Dhauru Gurung is a final year forestry undergraduate working with ACAFF trying to prevent deforestation in Mustang district.

Jemula Shrestha from Jh has been making Indra paper for a decade. She had to learn the technique secretly because her senior colleague didn’t share the process with her.

Suna Shrestha from Daknka has spent 20 years in the mountains collecting yaks. A heart ailment has recently forced her to do less-demanding work.
GETAWAY

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MISS MOTIVATION

KIRPA JOSHI

Gratitude doesn’t change the scenery. It merely washes clean the glass you look through so you can clearly see the colours. (Kirti Joshi)

Piano Workshop
I came to play music with Spanish maestro Daniel Soler. The free session is followed by a four-month course. 4 December, 11.00am, Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory. (01) 4802504, (9811585945)

CHRISTMAS CHORALE
Participate in the 15th anniversary holiday concert organized by the Kathmandu Chorale. Free entry, tickets available online. 9 December, 23.00pm, KMC School, Drikhyubshynivas.

TATWALIVE
Make your weekend memorable at Shambhala Garden with a walk or a drive and live performances by Tatwa Live. Visit: (01) 4441076.

BEYOND JOURNALISMS
A one-week exhibition featuring the creative works of 12 Maroto Vajpayee, where the art of journalism becomes an art of living. 26 November to 2 December, Matha Kapatramo Showroom, Babor Mohini Residencies. (01) 4411408.

THE LAUGH CLUB
Stand-up comedians Vimal Kamal and Abhishek Garg will perform in Kathmandu. Tickets on the stage. Book your seats now!

2 December, 5:30pm, Army Club, Someswara, Rs 5,000. (9811779776, 9811268802).

JYOTI BHANDARI

PARK ART FAIR
The 11th Park Art Fair is all set to kick off with 35 eminent national and international artists will be showcasing modern, contemporary and abstract art, sculptures, paintings, batik, art and performance. 1-3 December, 10.30am-9pm, Park Gallery. (9811585752, contact@parkgallery.com)

LIVE WITH ROHIT
Book your seats to boost your weekend listening to one of the most sought after singers in town. Rohit Jhunjhunwala Live at the Club. 8 December, 6.30pm, Downtown Pub & Grill, Sugyodipunj, Bishalpur. (9811597195)

NABIN AT TRISHARA
Listen to the all-time favourite singer, Nabin Kumar Bhatta, perform live.
27 December, 5pm onwards, Hotel Trishara, Pokhara. (9811810396)

GYOKOK AT GHANGRI
Heat up with Gyokok special Gyokok at a special package of Rs 1,700. (9811173333, gyokok.com)

THE VANISHED DETECTIVE
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CAVALLIR CHARIOT RIDE
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WOMEN'S HERITAGE TRIP
Explore the heritage of the women of Nepal. (9811667777, cavallirchariot.com)

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EVENTS

Khabar Garaun, Come and be a part of the National Women Commission’s Heritage Khabar Garaun. 24-24, talk time number: 10 December, 11.00am, National Women Commission, Bhadrakali Plaza, Kathmandu. (01) 2501070

Yala Newami, This exhibition by photographer Subin, featuring a series of images of the people of Kathmandu valley, reflects the ancient and vibrant culture of the Newars. 19-20 December, 5.00pm-10pm, Yola Mandali, Kawaal Road, Patan. Entry: free. (01) 2550060

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Christmas Chorale, Participate in the 15th anniversary holiday concert organized by the Kathmandu Chorale. Free entry, tickets available online. 9 December, 23.00pm, KMC School, Drikhyubshynivas.

Tatwa live, Make your weekend memorable at Shambhala Garden with a walk or a drive and live performances by Tatwa Live. Visit: (01) 4441076.

Beyond Journals, A one-week exhibition featuring the creative works of 12 Maroto Vajpayee, where the art of journalism becomes an art of living. 26 November to 2 December, Matha Kapatramo Showroom, Babor Mohini Residencies. (01) 4411408.

The Laugh Club, Stand-up comedians Vimal Kamal and Abhishek Garg will perform in Kathmandu. Tickets on the stage. Book your seats now!

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WOMEN’S HERITAGE TRIP, Explore the heritage of the women of Nepal. (9811667777, cavallirchariot.com)

White Sun, Reopened in Kathmandu on 8 December

MISS MOTIVATION

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Gratitude doesn’t change the scenery. It merely washes clean the glass you look through so you can clearly see the colours. (Kirti Joshi)

Tradition subverted, An exhibition that explores self identity and gender identification while engaging viewers in a dialogue about urbanisation and ecology, by artists Dihana Tamirakar and Arta Dhungel.
12 October to 3 December, 11.00am to 10.30pm, Kal Mandala, Kawaal Road, Patan. (01) 2550060

AIR QUALITY INDEX
KATHMANDU, 24-26 November

The air quality index in Kathmandu remained in the “Moderate” level for 99% of the past week. During this period, Nov 24-30 (monsoon), the levels only dipped into “Unhealthy (locally sensitive groups)” area of 4.7 (and even went up to 4.7) during the early morning hours. The weekly air quality index is a joint initiative of the UN Environment and Royal Nepal.
https://www.ambassy.katmandu.gov/nepal/air-quality-monitoring
The freedom to be free

In South Africa and Nepal we share a similar sense of dreams shattered

KUNDA DIXIT
in CAPE TOWN

POSTER ART: Embalmed artist Kudara Ghauzi’s depiction in the Driv-MAD Gallery in Cape Town of how Afrikan male leaders have wasted opportunities in the political arena to fight against injustice and human rights issues.

Inflation of Parliament by vested interest groups, and the activities of the medical education mafia in South Africa, these crimes are being committed by our society.

The so-called Third Wave of democracy is now messed up with the world 30 years ago saw the fall of the Iron Curtain, beginning of the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa and in Asia, the demise of dictatorships. That global surge of freedom turned 30 years ago, which also brought change to Nepal in 1990, has given way to disillusionment and cynicism.

There are parallels in both countries of former revolutionaries who squandered the people’s sacrifices to go on to become venal and ruthless as the rulers they replaced. Both failed to reap the democratic dividends, and continue to bleed their countries dry. Relatives of victims of the 1990 and 2001 violence, truth, justice and victims in both countries as apartheid era crimes in South Africa and human rights violations in Nepal are brushed under the carpet.

Nepal’s Ambassador to South Africa, Amit Raj, told Nepal Times this week that Nepal and South Africa have seen historical political transformations and can learn from each other’s experiences how they can better serve their peoples. He adds: “We are facing similar challenges in building enduring democratic institutions, making rule of law work effectively and efficiently and bringing the economic dividend to the people. We also face challenges of meeting the high aspirations of our people in the democratic environment.”

Political elite are at cross purposes and stake ethnic tenets for political gain in both places, just as here the white supremacist AfriForum tries to revive Afrikaner nationalism, and Maoistدونگول Attackers are trying to roll back history. The plan to turn Mandela’s residence in Alexandria town into a tourist attraction is just as neglected as the RF Museum in Sunnadal.

“In South Africa today race divisions are transformed into class divisions,” explains journalist Ida Joseph. “We are living in a country where the black sounds uncanny like Nepal: the prevail of police brutality, political authoritarianism, anti-corruption bureau, state security and intelligence agencies. Watching the overthrow of Robert Mugabe in neighbouring Zimbabwe, analysts here warn that Nepal may suffer the same fate.

And just like in Nepal, the media is one of the few institutions still relatively independent. A recent attempt by the establishment to turn the South Africa Broadcasting Corporation into a platform for propagating government propaganda was resisted by eight courageous journalists called the SASCOP.

An IMF mission visiting South Africa this week painted a gloomy picture for the country: “Despite South Africa’s institutional strength and favourable political conditions, increasing domestic political uncertainty, corruption and stalled reform efforts are challenging the economic outlook.”

We continue to dream of dreams shattered as we wait in the Apartheid Museum here, which has Mandela’s former prison cell: “The truth is that we are not yet free and have not yet been able to exercise the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed.”

KUNDA DIXIT

Backlash against the backlash

Electing autocrats in democracies threaten press freedom worldwide

SONIA AWALE
in JOHANNESBURG

Across the globe, elected populist leaders increasingly manipulate the media to raise power and diminish the institutions of democracy and the free press to consolidate their authority. This new breed of autocrats do not need to jail or kill journalists to get their message across with threats, blackmail and pressure on advertisers.

That was the underlying theme at the 10th Global Investigative Journalism Conference held here last week, while a military coup rocked neighbouring Zimbabwe, depositing Robert Mugabe after 37 years in power. Nearly 1,200 journalists from 130 countries took part, sharing their experiences of investigating issues in countries facing autocratic rule.

“We are facing global backlash on the themes we hold dear: free, fair, free and independent news media, the ability to hold our leaders accountable. Despite this, there is more investigative journalism now than ever before. We are the backlash against the backlash,” said David Kaplan, whose Global Investigative Journalism Network organised the conference.

One of the most impotent sessions, the mood turned sombre when Sheila Coronel (picture right) of Columbia University said: “Many of the killings of journalists are ironically taking place in democracies. Mexico is a democracy. In my own country, the Philippines, over 100 journalists have been killed, all in an era of democracy.”

Since being elected president in 2016, Rodrigo Duterte of Philippines has ordered a war on drugs that has so far killed 12,000 Filipinos, including teenagers and children, journalists who report on this are threatened.

Patricia Evangelista of the portal Rappler investigated the story of a clan family in Manila in which a father celebrating his birthday was gunned down in cold blood in front of his 12-year-old daughter. She wrote: “Murder has become a meme in Manila... it is not that we don’t understand human rights. The trouble is that one day we decided that some people aren’t human.”

Marcela Titani has reported on drugs and crime for the Quinto Elemento Lab in Mexico, one of the most dangerous countries in the world to be a journalist today. More than 100 have been killed there in the past 15 years, and Titani says many more are resigned to their fate.

“Mexico is where more journalists have been killed, in a country supposedly in peace time. It is really easy to harm journalists, and we have tried many ways to protect them, but we don’t know what to do anymore,” she admitted.

Journalsim in India, are also facing a backlash from Hindu nationalists after exposing government corruption and is malpractice. Another democracy, the United States, continues to face challenges to its press freedom. President Donald Trump is attempting to curb the press. “The truth is that we are not yet free and have not yet been able to exercise the freedom to be free, the right not to be suppressed.”
Justice League

The thing that Justice League has going for it, at a time when all superhero films are at an almost obligatory 150-minute mark, is that it is short and rather sweet at just two hours in length. While marked by disasters and somewhat infirmity for creating US$300 million to make, the film, seen in 2D instead of the needlessly painstaking 3D, is almost as funny as Thor Ragnarok.

(reviewed previously in this column and currently in theatres along with Justice League), and full of moments that bear re-watching — due to its quite star-spangled ensemble cast.

The DC Comics films, both very admired Marvel films, both from wildly successful comic book source material, are not doing well in terms of public opinion. Batman v Superman (2016) was lamentably bad — though the heavyweights of the title earned the film more than double its also $500-million budjet at the box office.

Justice League is a marked improvement on the former instalment, where Superman (Henry Cavill) was aided and abetted by Batman’s (Ben Affleck) extreme stupidity and panel rivalry. While that terrible film led to this tolerable one, between came the incredible, heart-stoppingly good Wonder Woman (summer, 2017) starring the phenon Gen Gadot, who was introduced as Batman v Superman reviving it up somewhat — though no one could quite fathom him just how good she’d prove to be.

This film take off with so much promise, partly because it already has the talent of the great Gadot, the presence of Amy Adams as Lois Lane, and of Diane Lane as Martha Kent, Superman’s two great loves.

We are also lucky to be introduced to the nicely cast Ezra Miller, as Barry Allen, aka The Flash, and to Ray Fisher as Victor Stone or Cyborg. Then there is Jason Momoa as Arthur Curry, or Aquaman — so for a character that is compelling due to his sardonic humour, but not so riveting in terms of his super-powers or actual role aside from swimming around, on land and on sea, trying to swim with disdain for what Bruce Wayne is trying to form, i.e. the Justice League of our title.

The world of Metropolis and Gotham City are in danger from a very silly, horned for named Steppenwolf (is completely unrecognisable and worthy, Clara Kent, who somewhat redeem himself by originating in Thanysira, the island of the Amazon, where Diana Prince, Wonder Woman, hails from.

That scene gives us another great glimpse of light sequences (too short, far too short) with her mother Hippolyta (played by the under-cast Connie Nielsen) her aunt General Antiope (the wondrous Rhi Rich), and the army of magnificent Amazons who do their very best to subdue this villain, who nevertheless retrieves one of the three “mother boxes” he needs to conquer the earth. With that predictable plot summary, all you really need to know is that things end well, with the finale not as grossly boring as usual, mainly because between our four super heroes and one heroine there are enough quips for all, and more than enough gimmicks, to make up for the dull rear of Steppenwolf.

HAPPENINGS

ELECTION CASUALTY: Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba on Thursday visited a victim of a bomb blast in Sitapur district who was brought to Teaching Hospital in Kathmandu for treatment.

POLL FEVER: Vice General Secretary of UML, Bishnu Prasad Paudel, during the election campaign in Rupandehi on Thursday. Paudel is contesting for the left alliance from Rupandehi-2 in the second phase of provincial and parliamentary polls to be held on 7 December.

ENGINEERING SOLUTIONS: President Bidya Devi Bhandari attends the international conference on Engineering Geology for Geodisciplinary Management held in Kathmandu on Tuesday.

QUEUE UP: Some 30,000 students have visited the new Avalanche Museum since its soft launch. The converted Audu 330 opened to the public on Tuesday.

HERALDING CHRISTMAS: Sailetee Crowne Plaza, Kathmandu hosts its annual cake making ceremony at the hotel on Sunday.
Who is funding the campaigning?

Himal Lamsal in Nagarkot,
27 November

Sahabu Basnet had an unusual proposal for her friends and family. Gathering them together, she asked each of them to give her the money they would have spent if she was getting married.

Basnet is running in the parliamentary election for the newly formed Bikhokeshi Saja Party and planned to use the cash for campaigning. Most of her friends and family took the unusual request positively and paid up, as did many well-wishers. Basnet has even used the money to finance her campaign.

Some of the other political parties have provided funds to their candidates. But as the cost for campaigning has gone up, other aspirants competing in the provincial and parliamentary elections, like Basnet, have been using different methods to collect funds.

Many candidates have made their bank account numbers public, many others have written to businessmen and friends and family abroad. "The expenditure is a lot more than what the Election Commission (EC) has specified," says Ganesh Prasad Dubil, a candidate from the Left alliance competing from Kathmandu 1 (Rai). "It is impossible to win the elections without spending money," he adds. Dubil notes that he isn't spending beyond the EC maximum. "I don't have to spend so much because this area is my party's stronghold, so the party cadres come on their own to campaign," he says.

But another candidate vying for a provincial seat admits to violating the EC's ceiling. "You have to feed the hundreds of cadres that campaign with you every day. And the most the cadres are waiting elections: these days those who have money win the votes," he says.

According to insiders, parties in Kathmandu have been spending anywhere from Rs 5 million to Rs 10 million per candidate. The maximum amount specified by the EC for parliamentary candidates is Rs 2.5 million, for provincial seats it's Rs 1.5 million.

"It is difficult for candidates who are not involved in business to cover the campaign fees for the elections," says Nirmal Narayan Subhadra of the Democratic alliance, who is contesting in the provincial election from Kathmandu-6. "It is not like before, when party cadres voluntarily campaigned for us," he adds. Subhadra insists he is keeping his costs to a minimum by mixing funds from businessmen sympathetic to the party.

Hari Krishna Shrestha of the Bikhokeshi Saja Party, who's running for a provincial seat in Kathmandu-6 (Rai), says his campaign fund is Rs 150,000, which he raised from well-wishers, friends and family abroad. Says Shrestha: "We don't have enough funds to spend extensively. We are moving around in smaller groups and making use of social media platforms."

An advice to the EU

Krisna Paudel in Kathmandu,
30 November 2017

Europe has always supported Nepal's development and democracy, so Nepal respect European people. But some European diplomats misconstrue Nepal's frontliners, and behave like victim.

Last week, the Election Commission (EC) barred two European Union (EU) observers from poll monitoring after they were found to have 'shown unconsciousness about our internal affairs. The EC would have probably not reacted if some EU representatives had not crossed their limit in the past.

There is a deep-rooted perception in Kathmandu that some EU countries clandestinely backed the Maoist agenda of ethnically identity-based provinces. In 2015, EU ambassador Renée Tevintk breached diplomatic norms by meeting a separatist. What Tevintk did was an infringement on Nepal's sovereignty, but Kathmandu didn't dare to declare her persona non grata.

When India imposed a crippling economic blockade against Nepal to show its displeasure at our new Constitution in 2015, the EC was expected to stand up for us. But it did not. The EC against New Delhi. Some EU members were afraid of straining ties with India, and feared the Indian line. It is no longer a secret that some EU members or diplomats want to feel the conduct of its representatives to Nepal. But it did not try to diplomatically pressure Kathmandu closer to Beijing. Today, the aged-old ties between Nepal and Rome are at risk, and the EU needs to salvage them by clearly mentioning that it is for Nepal and Nepalis and against hate speech and separatism.

No citizenship to vote

Rajkiran Maharaj in Annapurna Post,
27 November

60-year-old Jagdevi Cham, of Harkevalli in Mahottari district, hasn't voted in her life. She doesn't have a citizenship card, hence no vote.

For the last 16 years, Cham has been trying to get a citizenship card. When leaders visit district elections seeking votes, she always asks them to help but she has yet to find a candidate who understands her dilemma.

I don't have a citizenship so I have never cast a vote," says Cham, who comes from a Dalit community. Since the death of her mentally challenged husband, the woman has faced more obstacles to acquiring her identity card. "My husband didn't have a citizenship, so mine can't be made either. How am I supposed to produce documents now that he is gone?"

Because she doesn't have citizenship, Cham is deprived of the single woman's allowance that she is entitled to and a birth certificate for her 19-year-old disabled daughter. While having a citizenship will make her eligible for social security allowance, Cham says it will also fulfill her wish to vote for a candidate who will work for the poor.

Cham's neighbour, Ashagbeedi Sada, is suffering the same fate. At 62, she doesn't have a citizenship, which makes her ineligible to vote and receive social security allowance, despite being a single woman. Her children don't have EIDs either. "I want to see my citizenship before I die. I wish to cast a vote and elect a candidate," she says. Neshu Sada has lived in Harkevalli for four decades. Her husband, who passed away several years ago, didn't have a citizenship, nor does she. "Politicians come to our village all the time asking for votes, promising to get us our citizenships, but since elected they never come back."

With no identity papers, locals are finding that they can't have a passport made to apply for labour migration either. Sahalhi Sada Munasiar sums it up. "Because we don't have citizenship, we can't access government services. But who will listen to our plea?" These four women are just a few members of this poor Dalit community who have been deprived of the right to vote all their life for their lack of citizenship. Absent of the provincial and parliamentary elections on 7 December they will again be looking for candidates who understand — and will act upon — their situation.

Harkevalli lies in Province 3, where 12 leaders are contesting the election. Mahottari has four elections commission officials and has already elected local level officials for 10 municipalities and 5 village councils.

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Nepali Times December 1, 2017

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Neither bullets nor cynicism will deter people from delivering their political verdict

OM ASTHA RAI
in RUPANDEH

Andhuli Pandeey, 50, was killed by police in September 2015, days before Nepal’s new Constitution was promulgated amidst violence in the Terai. She was inside her own roadside house when police opened fire on protesters obstructing a supply convoy. A stray bullet hit her in the head, and she died four days later.

Four other people in Bahrari, a village 17 km east of Lumbini – including two children – were shot dead by police on the same day. Their funeral guns were burning on the banks of the Tista River when people were celebrating the new Constitution in Kathmandu.

Two weeks after the Bahrari shooting, a government official named Nanda’s husband, Shashi Dhar Pandeey, told his father to meet and share his grievances with PM Sushil Koirala, who was in Bhairahawa on a day.

“No,” he said, before angrily hanging up the phone.

Two years later, even as Nepal is poised to fully implement the Constitution after successfully holding local, provincial and federal elections in 2017, Shashi Dhar is still seething with anger at politicians whose quarrel over the Constitution left his wife dead.

But he is not boycotting elections. Pandeey voted in local polls in June and is casting his vote again in parliamentary and provincial elections on 7 December. "You may be angry with politicians, but you shouldn’t abstain from voting in a democracy," he says.

Most voters share that sentiment: politicians are liars, self-centred and indifferent to people’s sufferings – but that won’t stop them from voting. They know they might not be able to change anything if they vote, but they see certain they won’t be able to improve things if they do not.

This is why over 60% of voters turned out in the first phase of parliamentary and provincial elections in 35 districts early this week, despite a series of bomb blasts and adverse weather in high mountain constituencies. Voter turnout is likely to increase in the second phase in 45 districts early next week.

Mass bombs have exploded since the first phase, killing a temporary policeman and injuring many candidates and their supporters. This week, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba’s Poudel in Rupandehi in campaign, he was greeted with an explosion. All these blasts are believed to be the work of a group of Maoist dissidents who want to thwart elections, led by Netra Bikram Chand. Even in 2013, when Nepal elected the second Constituent Assembly, many areas were rocked by blasts carried out by a larger Maoist faction led by Mohan Baidya. But voters turned out in large numbers to exercise their democratic rights, eventually forcing Baidya to rethink his strategy and take part in the polls. "Our democracy is very strong, and electoral violence cannot weaken it," says Narend Kuti, editor of Lumbini Khadga, a biweekly newspaper in Bhairahawa.

ON THE MARCH: A rally of the Left Alliance in Bhairahawa on 16 November.

NUTRA BIKRAM CHAND: Even in 2013, when Nepal elected the second Constituent Assembly, many areas were rocked by blasts carried out by a larger Maoist faction led by Mohan Baidya. But voters turned out in large numbers to exercise their democratic rights, eventually forcing Baidya to rethink his strategy and take part in the polls. "Our democracy is very strong, and electoral violence cannot weaken it," says Narend Kuti, editor of Lumbini Khadga, a biweekly newspaper in Bhairahawa.

Ongoing elections mark the dawn of federalism but candidates believe power will rest in Kathmandu

SHREEJANA SHRESTHA

As Gagan Thapa walks into houses in ward number 38 in Mahalakshmi, Kathmandu (constituency number 4), everyone greets him like a celebrity. In return, he says simply: "Hajinka aarayikya rabab sharekhab roba?" (Let me be blessed with your best wishes.)

Clad in a red and black chequered shirt, black pants and sports shoes (imported from London for the election campaign), Thapa knows how to connect emotionally with the locals. His shoes are almost worn from excessive walking for 18 continuous days, but his face is full of confidence.

During his campaigning for the upcoming second phase of parliamentary and federal elections on 7 December, Thapa seldom urges people to vote for him. He won this same constituency in the 2013 constituent assembly election with 13,000 more votes than his closest rival from the CPN (UNM).

A Central Committee member of the Nepali Congress (NC) and a former health minister, Thapa was projected as chief minister of province 1 but is just one of the senior leaders who believes that Kathmandu will remain the power centre after the elections, which are the final step in creating a federal Nepal. "I was ready to contest for the parliament of province 3 but my party didn’t finalize the name of the chief minister before the election and I opted to fight from constituency number 4 for the central Parliament," Thapa told Nepal Times in Mahalakshmi.

He agrees that coming years will be difficult in terms of decentralizing power to the provinces. "The next five years will be difficult for us as the central government will try to retain its power, but the fight will go on.

"Thapa is pitted against Rajan Bhattari of the CPN (UML), who is projected as the foreign minister if the left alliance leads the next government. His major promise is improving public transportation, developing tourism areas and open spaces and replacing existing vehicles with electric ones.

Bhattari is sure that the new system
Federal fabric

Vilified as an anti-Madhesi force, the UML seems to be aware of the price it might have to pay for this ill-repute and is consciously ensuring that there are Madhesi faces in its election rallies. The RJPN and the FSPN are not bothered about being labelled ‘Madhesi parties’, but their candidates say they have support from hill people as well. “People from not just Madhesi but also hill communities love and respect me,” says Rajesh Ranjan Sharma, an RJPN provincial candidate in Rupandehi 3.

Both sides want to avoid the uncomfortable truth that the rise of parochialism during Nepal’s painful transition to a federal republic has pulled the social fabric and the coming together of the two communities during elections might not be enough for reconciliation.

Early this year, in a bid to persuade Madhesi parties to participate in polls, the NC-Maoist coalition proposed to divide province 5 so that western hill districts like Gulmi and Arghakhanchi would be grafted onto other hill provinces. But that proposal was rejected outright by the UML, which spearheaded a Butwal-centric campaign to foil the ruling coalition’s efforts to amend the Constitution. As a result, the UML has won the hearts of hill people living in the plains of province 5. It did extremely well in local elections, winning not just mayor and deputy mayor but all 19 ward councils in Butwal. The NC’s Bal Krishna Khand had won both Constituent Assembly elections from Rupandehi but he did not dare contest elections this time. He was probably alarmed by the shock defeat of his brother Ram Krishna Khand in the mayoral race of Tilottama municipality.

The UML might have been a favourite of the hill dwellers along the highway, but it has antagonised the Madhesi community in the southern belt of province 2, so in other 75 constituencies. A Madhesi auto rickshaw driver in Bhairahawa said: “I would rather die than voting for UML.”

Zakir Hussain, a former in Lambni, says he prefers to vote for a Madhesi candidate. “If the Madhesi candidate is not promising, I will go for the NC,” he says. “The UML does not deserve our votes.”

versus reality

Influential candidates can buy votes, and the money they splurge on winning elections is actually an investment for them. If they are elected, they will abuse their power to get a return on those investments.

Says Rajendra Kandel, a newly elected ward council chair in Bhirawahu. “Distributing cash and organizing boats to influence voters has become the new normal, which is the real threat to our democracy.”

The Constitution has ensured separate rights to the central and federal governments, how can we retain power here?” Bhattarai is taking a different approach than Thapa here. Many voters still don’t know him, so as he introduces himself he urges people to vote for his party. “This is not a personal competition between Gargi and me. We are our parties’ representatives and people will cast their votes on the basis of the agendas put forward by the parties,” he said.

Drinking water and road management are Bhattarai’s priorities for the constituency where the UML won all wards but two in the recent local elections.

While Thapa says he was prepared to run for a provincial seat, many other senior leaders are more reluctant, doubtful that the current system will be decentralized. Federalism is in place. Sitting in a provincial parliament could put their political careers in the shadows, they believe.

Former NC lawmaker Rasheshwar Adhikari remarks: “It is obvious for leaders to be attracted to the central government because nobody knows what kind of provincial governments are going to be set up after the election.” He adds: “The leaders know the power centre will be Singh Darbar and it will take time to decentralize power.”

The NC’s Balkaw Prakash Sharma, whose political base is Butwal, was rumoured to be in line for the chief minister post for province 1, but is instead vying for a central government seat. Likewise, Mahendra Thakral of the Rastra Janata Party Nepal (RJPN) also filed his candidacy for Parliament from Mahottari instead of competing for a seat from province 2.

Madhav Kumar Nepal who earlier contested from Rastaban, has registered his candidacy for the central government from Kathmandu 2 while his colleague, UML leader Yogesh Bhattarai, is contesting for the central government from Taplejung. However, analyst Pitamber Sharma doesn’t agree with leaders’ thinking. He says there is no alternative to decentralizing power after the elections.

“The centre can’t come up with local development agenda once federalism is implemented. But looking at the ongoing campaign of leaders, it feels like the centre will do everything for the federal states.”

Sharma adds: “If leaders haven’t yet understood how the power centre will drift to the states, how will the people understand?”
Upwardly mobile

Whatever you do in Saudi Arabia, don’t use your mobile phone on a domestic flight. The poor chap was sentenced to a twelve-month prison term with a wet camel-hide whip on each hind cheek.

It is pretty much a free-for-all out there when it comes to the websites you surf to watch video, but they draw the line on WHERE you watch them. In Nepal, too, the AMCAT generation is exposing predators in the workplace and there may soon be a law that requires contacts for foreign direct investment to check all the phone numbers that joint venture enterprises can only have CEOs who are genuines.

But the Saudi mobile incident should be a wake-up call to Nepal’s newly-elected legislators to update our laws regarding the use of mobile phones in restricted areas.

There was a famous widely-reported case of a Minister of Telecommunication and Mass Communication (who cannot be identified because of privacy laws) who took a call on his mobile phone when it chimed loudly while he was at the podium delivering a keynote address in the Hotel Yak-yak-yak on the theme of Nepal’s Strategies to Advance from Potato Chips to Microchips. It was a sure sign that Nepal has finally made the transition from a Maoist Revolution to a Mobile Revolution.

The question is, how do we regulate it?

We should not be worried about investors in the telecom sector abandoning without paying billions in capital gains tax by using legal loopholes. Such things happen in the age of globalization. We should be much more vigilant about our public officials attending to calls on their mobiles while attending to calls from nature. This is especially problematic if they are wearing the two-tier national dress while taking a leak.

Having once had the opportunity of using the facilities at Sintha Darbar, I noticed that it is invariably just as the Honourable Minister steps up to the podium for the announcement ceremony that his cellphones will emit a cheerful warble.

What follows is a series of intricately sequenced manoeuvres that involve a) undoing two sets of survival knots, b) clasping the horn of the dunes under the chin, even as c) the mobile is held in position by one upholstered shoulder to the right ear, while d) hopping around on one leg as the hydraulic pressure builds up to intolerable levels. All members of the male species will readily attest that such emergencies wreak havoc on aim.

As we all know, Nepal has some splendid laws, the world’s best, in fact. But we have a slight problem implementing them. There is no point just banning mobile use in restricted areas, it has to be accompanied by a serious deterrent. And here we have a lot to learn from the Saudis, who have no problems at all with implementation because they are world leaders in the highly specialised field of punishment jurisprudence. Being liberal-minded I would never support capital punishment by decapitation, but there is something to be said about chopping off an offending urinary appendage.

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