PURCHASING POWER

MORE ON PAGE 10-11

Ramesh Kumar

N epal’s richest who used to bankroll parties from the sidelines in exchange for personal, professional and policy favours, have decided it makes more sense to enter politics themselves. Money, not political competency, has therefore become a deciding factor in who is ultimately elected into leadership. But because politics and ill-gotten wealth feed each other, governance suffers. Nepal’s political parties, meanwhile, have to fudge poll spending because of expense limitations set by the Election Commission.

The Nepali Congress (NC) listed only Rs 6.3 million in election expenses, the UML, Rs 10.9 million while the Maoist Centre just Rs 8.3 million in 2017. The NC also listed Rs 20.9 million in donations, while the UML said it got only Rs 40.6 million from businesses.

In reality, a study by the Election Observers Committee shows that campaigning expenses were vastly underreported in 2017. It estimates that parties spent Rs 5 billion in just local elections, and Rs 66 billion was used to garner votes for the federal Parliament. “I had never seen so much cash in one place before,” said a member of the NC’s election-targeted finance management committee. “We saw businessmen come and go with suitcases full of money. It was strictly cash. They did not want to leave a paper trail.”

Political parties have also relied on membership fees to raise funds. The UML raised Rs 41.8 million through such levies in the last fiscal year. But that is nowhere near enough to cover campaigning costs. This means falling back on big businesses for funding.

Kailash Chandra has publicly stated that she became a UML MP by paying the party Rs 70 million. Businessman Moti Bajracharya of the UML was Minister of State in K P Oli’s government, while Umesh Shrestha of the NC is a state minister in the current government. Nearly all big businesses set aside ‘facilitation fees’ to donate to parties across the political spectrum to ensure protection.

“The business community fears that a party which has not been placed may make things difficult if it comes to power,” says a prominent FPCI member.

Numerous laws like the Banking and Financial Institutions Act, the Medical Education Bill, or the Foreign Investment and Technology Transfer Act were passed by businessmen MPs in parliamentary committees.

Tycoons often pay political leaders under the table to get them into the legislature under the proportional representation mechanism. Businessmen say they have no choice because they are tired of party extremists ahead of every election. Politicians use brokers to raise cash, and they are promised a pound of flesh.

The blurring of the boundaries between business and politics undermines democracy and development, says political science professor Krishna Khanal.

“I don’t blame the business community because it is entirely up to the leaders to decide whether to take their money or not. Trouble is, politicians have no integrity,” Khanal adds.

Battle lines drawn for Nepal elections

Editorial PAGE 2

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Battle lines drawn for Nepal elections

The inauguration of the Rashtriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) ‘State’ Convocation in Kathmandu provided a preview of the issues that will dominate Nepal’s elections a little more than a year away.

Invited were leaders of other main parties, and the mood was one with hammers and tongs about secularism and minority. It sounded like the hurt feelings already, indicating the setting for the upcoming 2033 polls.

From the RPP stage, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba manhandled placards shouting “the need for like-minded parties to work together for the betterment of the country”. Madhav Kumar Nepal of the Unified Communist who split from the UML urged the RPP not to “slide backwards” – meaning don’t for minority.

But it was CP Mainali of the CPN (Marxist-Leninist) and Pushpa Kamal Dahal of the CPN (Maoist-Center) who showed that despite being once divided Communists, the comrades have widely divergent views on Nepal’s erstwhile minority.

Mainali extolled Kailash Mani Singh’s nationalistic credentials, adhere that every political change in Nepal in the past half century has been a result of foreign (read “Indian”) interference, Mainali, who suffered serious injuries to a highway crash last year, has been taking a pro-monarchy statements.

Dahal played to the gallery saying his Marxist party will be one for minority but there may be “patricians”. He then took a dig at Mainali, saying it was abased for a monarch who once decimated the anti-secularism, anti-Sikhism and anti-monarchist line. He made a scathing attack on those who “go against Mao, but downcaste” in a party unity gathering in Patan last week. When political parties cannot be distinguished by their socio-economic or political agenda, it is tempting for them to fall back on religion and ideology to divide minority days. The parties have felt the public pulse, and direct disenchantment with the current federal polity, especially against secularism which is seen to be fostered by outside forces.

India’s gravitational pull on Nepal also means that the election campaigning next month could end up being determined by the outside forces. The seminal debate in India itself. We are already beginning to see political alignments between and within Nepal’s parties refiguring this, and it will be more apparent in the coming months.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Revisiting HIV/AIDS

In the early 1990s, there were reports to the contrary that the number of people infected with HIV/AIDS in Nepal was on the decline. It is now widely accepted that many of these reports were incorrect. However, there was no conclusive evidence for the report.

While there have been some concerns about the spread of the disease in Nepal, the numbers have remained relatively stable over the past two decades.

The initial reports of HIV/AIDS in Nepal were confirmed in 1986, with the first reported case occurring in 1987. Since then, the number of cases has continued to rise, with an estimated 5500 cases in 2019.

In order to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS, the government of Nepal has implemented various programs and initiatives, including the establishment of HIV/AIDS treatment centers and the provision of antiretroviral therapy.

What are the current statistics?

As of 2019, there were an estimated 5500 people living with HIV/AIDS in Nepal. The majority of these cases were其中 women, with 40% of cases occurring among women aged 15-49.

What are the risk factors for HIV/AIDS in Nepal?

The most common risk factor for HIV/AIDS in Nepal is sex, with 40% of cases occurring among women aged 15-49. The other main risk factors include injection drug use, multiple sexual partners, and early age at first intercourse.

What are the symptoms of HIV/AIDS?

The symptoms of HIV/AIDS can vary, but they may include fever, cough, fatigue, and a sore throat. As the disease progresses, more severe symptoms may develop, including weight loss, diarrhea, and a general feeling of ill health.

What are the treatment options for HIV/AIDS?

Treatment options for HIV/AIDS in Nepal include antiretroviral therapy (ART), which involves the use of a combination of drugs to suppress the replication of the HIV virus. The goal of ART is to slow down the progression of the disease and improve the quality of life for people living with HIV/AIDS.

What are the challenges in providing treatment for HIV/AIDS in Nepal?

One of the biggest challenges in providing treatment for HIV/AIDS in Nepal is the lack of access to ART. Many people living with HIV/AIDS in Nepal do not have access to the necessary medications, and those who do have access may not be able to afford them.

What are the future outlooks for HIV/AIDS in Nepal?

The future outlook for HIV/AIDS in Nepal is uncertain, but efforts are being made to reduce the spread of the disease and improve the lives of people living with HIV/AIDS. These efforts include improving access to ART, increasing awareness and education, and supporting research into new treatments.

What can individuals do to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS?

Individuals can prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS by practicing safe sex, avoiding needle sharing, and avoiding contact with infected blood or semen.

What are the international efforts to combat HIV/AIDS?

The international community is working together to combat HIV/AIDS, with numerous organizations and agencies involved in providing treatment and support to people living with the disease.

What are the global implications of HIV/AIDS?

HIV/AIDS is a global problem, with an estimated 37 million people living with the disease worldwide. The global response to HIV/AIDS has been characterized by a combination of increased awareness, education, and support for those living with the disease.
TIME TO MEET AGAIN: USA

Have a healthy journey with all precautions taken down to the smallest detail for your in-flight safety.
Omician may not be as risky, but take care

Boosters for high-risk groups, and vaccines for as many Nepalis as possible

Sonia Awale

The fact that Omician was detected in an individual (now recovered) who had arrived in Nepal several weeks before the variant was first identified in Botswana is grim. It was already circulating and traveling bars were not closed.

The new strain has been detected in 57 countries just over two weeks after it was first found. What is known is that it is highly transmissible but likely not very severe. No significant increase in hospitalisation is found among infected individuals in places with outbreaks.

Looking at preliminary findings I don't think it will lead to another major surge or lockdowns like Delta, but having the 57 that must be prepared and contain it to prevent further mutation and more virulent strains, says epidemiologist Lhamo Yangchen Sherpa of IPSAS Nepal.

She adds: "We do try by vaccinating as many people as possible including boosters if they are nearing expiry date, following safety measures especially indoors and by better communication with government policies to control the spread of new strains.

"One of the main concerns with Omician mutations in the spike protein is the impact it might have on vaccines. Most vaccines including Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca and J&J primarily target Spike's spike protein, so there are worries that the new variant will bypass immunity afforded by these vaccines.

Mutations are natural, but concern is about new variants that may behave other viruses because of their much stronger proofreading system of evolution.

Speaking with Indie Speak, Polly Roy, professor of virology at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine said: 'Even though we have a mutation, it’s not in the receptor-binding site area so much. Thus, if they change too much, the virus will not bind to host cells and will not survive. And the vaccines target that area, so the vaccines will still work against Omician infection."

Says infectious disease specialist at MAMS Hospital Apar Subedi: "Even if the vaccines are less effective against this variant, we still have to be ready to fight off new infections. And given that antibodies wane over time, Nepal's frontline workers and the elderly should be prioritised for booster, if possible with vaccines known to have higher efficiency."There are also concerns that despite regulatory only mild symptoms Omician could affect vulnerable populations much more than younger people spread the virus.

"Most of the initial Omician infections are said to be mild and among young and vaccinated people, which means Nepal could take a big step for another surge. "Don't be surprised if we do," says Shuvra Koirala, a Nepali public health expert based in Hong Kong.

"We have all the necessary fuels to start the wildfire: low vaccination coverage, poor adherence to public health measures, lackluster preparedness, and questionable surveillance," Koirala warns.

"But the morale among booster remains when over 60% of Nepal's targeted population has now received the first dose. In an ideal world, universal coverage is the way to go but the government hasn’t been able to vaccinate the majority of Nepalis, so we cannot wait forever for boosters," adds Subedi.

With the rapid spread of Omician in the region, the Nepali government has announced that the vaccine at least 200,000 people a day and the Health Minister Bishnu Khatiwada has asked people who have been inoculated with two doses of vaccine to also receive the third dose to prevent the risk of the third wave. Khatiwada was quoted as saying that the government had a stock of 20 million doses of different jabs and it will start administering the booster from mid-December with 16,000 vaccination centres across the country.

So far Nepal has received 25,650,000 vaccine doses, of which 60,000 doses are still in stock. In the past three months, a total of 34,944,460 doses of different jabs are arriving in Nepal: 9,400,000 doses of Astrazeneca Covishield, 2,168,000 VeroCell (Novavax), 2,740,000 Pzifer (BNT 162) and 1,963,600 Moderna.

But the government’s local problem is that 75% of Nepal’s health authorities are authorised to administer only additional doses, not a booster, and only for immunocompromised people and individuals above 60 who had received VeroCell, as recommended by the WHO.

"Our priority is still to vaccinate the targeted population before those who are still not vaccinated," adds Updegra. "And for us, this is focusing on activities to convince more people to inoculate, add vaccination booths to increase access and where required administer the doses door to door."

At present, 29% of Nepal’s population has been fully inoculated while 33.8% have been vaccinated at least once. Experts say communication about vaccination schedules a few days before the campaign in local language and on platforms most consumed is crucial in further increasing the uptake.

Speaking on his social platform, Speaker Gyanendra Dixit of the Congress or Molecular Dynamics Nepal recommended patience over panic: "Let's wait and watch until we have more concrete findings on Omician. Until then mask up and vaccinate yourself. An immunised person is not a booster, those in vulnerable groups should get it."

Democracy Summit

The US Embassy in Nepal hosted a Summit for Democracy in the mid of a Summit to be convened by President Joe Biden on Human Rights Day. Prime Minister Shekha Deuba is expected to represent Nepal at the Summit that will focus on forgetting corruption, countering authoritarianism, and promoting human rights. "The way Nepal has been a voice for the region and the world. Within the last 15 years, Nepal has progressed through a series of civil unrest, subsequent peace process, the return of democratic governance, and the ratification of a constitution that defined Nepal as a secular, democratic, and federal government," said Ambassador Larry G. Palmer.

Digital December

Laxmi Bank is introducing a unique lifestyle campaign wherein customers can make QR payments on smartphones (QR Merchant) with the option of a money-back guarantee. This money-back guarantee is a QR Merchant, and in case of QR payments, customers can get 50% cashback up to Rs 500 daily, 5% cashback on using wa co-op grained card. Additionally, cardholders can receive a free sticker pack and the paid sticker packs on Viber will be free exclusively for Laxmi users to download.

Turkish CEO awarded

Turkish Airlines chief Yücel Ayhan has received the CEO Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2022 APEX Middle East conference in Los Angeles, California. The airline was also recognised with APEX World Class Awards, a Five Star status from the many awards received.

New oxygen plants

New oxygen generating plants owned by the World Bank have come into operation in Lahan and Janakpur, providing the required oxygen supply during the COVID-19 pandemic. The plants have been set up in the four districts where oxygen supply has been a major challenge for the local population. The plants are expected to provide 400 litres of oxygen per day, which should help in addressing the current crisis.

Ncell

Ncell has collaborated with Bangladesh Viber to offer a data pack with Viber messaging in an add-on. These latest Ncell data packages are available in both prepaid and postpaid subscribers across the four top performing data packs, now Total 4G Top, Total 4G Max and Total 4G with an added charge. Additionally, subscribers receive a free sticker pack and the paid sticker packs on Viber will be free exclusively for Ncell users to download.

Samsung winners

Samsung has announced 21 winners of its "Deeply Aido" contest, which was launched in May this year. The winners were selected from a total of 21,500 entries, with the top prize being a 1-year subscription to ZOEY. All winners will also receive the Samsung Galaxy S20, which included a Samsung Galaxy Tab S7, Samsung Galaxy Watch Active 2, Samsung Galaxy Buds Live, and a Samsung Galaxy Buds Pro.

Satellite Teleport

Dish Home has established a new satellite teleport in Lekubat, Kathmandu to enhance its satellite service in the event of technical or natural disasters. Dish home officials hope the installation of equipment of the teleport will provide reliable service to the majority of customers in Kathmandu through their satellite services. Apart from ensuring effective communication, the elevated site will be able to transmit the uplink to the new station.

Kona redesigned

Kona has launched the new 2021 Kona model. The new 2021 Kona can change the way you ride. The new design features a larger battery capacity with 10% more of the battery. The Kona Electric GSD model now has a range of 120 miles on a single charge.

Nokia Life

Nokia has launched an innovative new mobile phone designed to assist residents in the Philippines and other countries with disabilities and those who require additional assistance in communication. Nokia Life aims to help older people, people with disabilities, and those who need extra assistance in communication. The phone is designed to be simple and user-friendly, allowing users to easily make calls and send messages. It also features a large display and large buttons, making it easy for users to navigate and interact with the device.

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Made in Nepal peanut butter in Japan
A Japanese social entrepreneur brings skills and income to Khotang’s peanut farmers by finding export market

Sonia Awale

The highest quality tea is synonymous with Darjeeling. Outstanding beer is produced in Pilsen. Camembert cheese gets its name from a town in France. In future, could Khotang become the name for the world’s peanut peanut butter?

An up-and-coming business venture led by a Japanese social entrepreneur is set to put this outlying Himalayan district in eastern Nepal on the world map for its premium natural peanut butter. Kotohachi Naka’s plan to turn Darchula of Haful Municipality in Khotang district into the world’s peanut butter capital is picking up speed after being stalled by the Covid crisis. She is now back to get the farmers she trained and the factory she set up and running.

Naka used to work with a Japanese IoT (internet of things) company that used to support charity work among children in Khotang. On her first visit, she undertook the tumultuous 13-hour drive from Kathmandu to Khotang along rough mountains roads to meet farmers. She found that peanut was the main cash crop in southern Khotang, but drier than usual weather was forcing farmers to migrate to India and the Gulf for work.

“I was trying to find a more sustainable way to improve the lives of children, and concluded that the best way to go about that was to make their parents more economically capable, rather than just giving handouts,” says Naka.

Three years ago, she met a farmer who told her he did not want to migrate but continue farming if there was a way to make a living from it. This had a profound effect on Naka, who went on to establish Sanachi Inc. to train local farmers in organic farming and making peanut butter, so they did not have to migrate.

During their extensive research, Naka and her colleagues Shihab Mahjar of Bipsana Inc. learned that Khotang locals grew two types of peanuts: the smaller, rustier local variety for their own consumption, and the larger hybrid peanut to be sold to millinders at low rates.

“Weeds were smothering how good it was. I was convinced we could train local people to make it and set up a company,” adds Naka, who had to first get used to a place without electricity. Luckily, the village got power just before the factory opened.

“As a Japanese, it took me time to get used to the lack of punctuality here,” laughs Naka. The farmers who showed up were all women because most of the men had migrated. Unintentionally, the peanut enterprise also became a tool for women empowerment.

Naka and her team trained 60 households to produce organically grown peanuts which the company bought for a higher price than millenders, benefitting 300 farmers. “Our whole idea was to raise living standards sustainably, by providing skills and not handing out money,” explains Naka.

Next, they trained their staff of 14 women to make peanut butter in a few crucial steps:

1. Select undamaged peanuts manually
2. Remove outer shell of selected peanuts
3. Carefully roast the peanuts
4. Clean and break each peanut into two halves
5. Peanut butter is ground through a mill.
6. Quality control is paramount for the export market, and this is meticulously maintained with separate raw material and processing that retains the unique taste and texture of the butter from Khotang peanuts as well as a protein level of 1.3% — higher than any other similar product. Naka, 43, grew up in Fukui, learning the basics of business from her father who owned a chain of beauty salons. She moved to Tokyo as a researcher for the IoT company. After three years, Naka opened Sanachi Inc. in December 2017, and export of Khotang peanut butter started a year later.

Distribution within Nepal at Le Sherpa Farmers’ Market, Local Project Nepal, Himalgiri Organic Farm have resumed after the pandemic. Japan now accounts for 90% of sales, and there is also budding interest from companies in the United States and the United States.

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On the way to the city of Kathmandu, we came across an old man sitting in the street, selling coins. He told us that he had been collecting coins for over 50 years. He showed us a collection of old coins, including some that were over a century old. He explained that these coins were originally used in Nepal and were made of brass, copper, and silver.

Numismatics Museum in Kathmandu, Nepal: This museum houses a vast collection of coins and numismatic artifacts. The museum is located in the heart of Kathmandu, and it is a must-visit for numismatists and collectors.

The museum is home to over 10,000 coins, including some that date back to the 11th century. The coins are displayed in various sections, including a section dedicated to coins from the 17th century. The museum also houses a section dedicated to coins from the British Raj, which was in power in Nepal from 1846 to 1934.

The coins on display include a variety of materials, including brass, copper, and silver. The museum also contains a large collection of mint marks, which are symbols that indicate the mint where the coin was made. These symbols include letters and numbers that are used to identify the mint.

In addition to the coins, the museum also contains a collection of medals, tokens, and other numismatic artifacts. The museum is open to the public, and it is a great place to learn about the history of numismatics in Nepal.
aspirations, with their various aphorisms.

Swayambeh Joshi writes that these aesthetic choicer were intended to attract the public's imagination, their devotion towards the rulers and their families through creative and unusual sensibilities. The smallest silver coins in the world is a fact a Malla coin - called Janwa in Nepali, or "Pukhara" - minted during the reign of Jyapu Prakash Malla, the last king of Kathmandu, and weighing 0.056 grams (picture below, left). The Malla period ended with Prithvi Narayan Shah's annexation of the three kingdoms of the Valley. Historian Bihesh Rai Panta says that before Prithvi Narayan, there was hardly any concrete evidence of Shah coin. But after his conquest of the Valley, unified Nepal's first king to issue silver coin in his own name.

The earliest coin with Prithvi Narayan Shah's name inscribed on it, has a relief in the obverse surrounded by "Sat Sri Prithvi Narayan Shalikha" written within gaps made by a square on a square. The sun and the moon are in each top corner and at the bottom is inscribed the date in the Saka calendar: 1682 (1770AD).

On the reverse is a wheel at the centre divided into three sections, on which it is written "Sat Sri Rama'. There is a kshasha at the centre of this wheel decorated in dots in a bell-shaped arrangement. Around the edge are letters S, R, N, A, V, and "Sat Sri Jyapu Rana(Shah) after the patron deity of the Shah dynasty.

The Shah coinage also saw rise in the use of gold, which had begun sporadically in the middle-Malla period. Despite the rare metal, each Shah king or queen has issued at least a couple Naigold coins (named after the commemorative medallions of the Moghul emperor Shah Jahan issued at his court in the 17th century). In their name, although for special occasions only.

As Nepal had no silver mines, the metal had to be imported from Tibet. As per the 1656 treaty Mahendra Malla signed with Tibet, the coins minted in Nepal would be used there as well, allowing Kathmandu Valley's trade, art and culture to spread and flourish.

The full value of Nepali coins in Tibet was set at a single denomination of 1/2 Karna. But when people needed smaller denominations, the coin could be cut into two-thirds, half, and one-third along the petalled design (picture, far left). These were called "chopan" in Tibet, meaning "cut Mohar" and some dating to the time of Jyapu Prakash Malla and Pratap Singh Shah can be found at the National Numismatic Museum. Jyapu Prakash Malla had hoped to alleviate the crisis brought by Prithvi Narayan's blockade of the Valley by minting low quality coin made with copper to export to Tibet.

When the Shah king wanted to revert to using pure silver coins, the Tibetans asked to have all older coins replaced as well. The war of annexation had just ended and this would have added financial burden to the new ruler in Kathmandu. The dispute went unresolved, which in turn inherited by Prithvi Narayan's descendants after his death. Tibet by then had begun to send low quality rock salt to Nepal in retaliation.

The Nepali delegation sent to Tibet to resolve these trade issues was rejected, giving the Gorkha kingdom a pretext to invade Tibet with the help of the British. The first invasion ended with Gorkhalik victory, and Nepal agreed to pay reparations to Kathmandu and 165,000,000 in annual tribute. But after the first year, Tibet stopped paying it, and the war continued.

During the second invasion, China's Qing emperor came to the aid of Tibet and chased the Gorkha forces back over the mountains as far south as Nuwakot, only 30 km northwest of Kathmandu. The Sino-Nepal war ended in 1792 with Gorkhalik defeat. A treaty was signed at Ber SAYATI, near Nuwakot Palace, and Nepal paid tribute to China in 1792, 1794, 1795, 1842 and 1863.

Following the war, Nepal was no longer able to export its coins to Tibet and the number of coins minted in the country steadily declined. A mint was established in Lhasa itself, which affected the amount of silver coming to Nepal. The Gorkhalik were also waging a costly war against the East India Company in newly-conquered areas of Garwâl and Kumaon.

After the Anglo-Gorkha war, rules in Kathmandu tried to compensate for the shortage of silver coins by prohibiting the import of British coins and turning the East India Company coins into Nepali coins, but even then the supply was not enough.

In fact, "Company" coins became so valuable that elderly women in remote parts of Nepal can still be found beasting garlands made of East India Company silver coins (picture above, right).

Later in 18th century, the second Rana prime minister, Rano Shiddhi Upadhyaya brought water wheel-powered machines to help craftsmen mint consistent-looking coins more efficiently. These machines would flatten the metal and etch designs on both sides.

Rano Shiddhi's nephew and successor Shum Shambhu then brought coal-powered machines to mint coins. This gift of industrialisation would mint around 12,000 alloy coins daily in Dhansura Takar in Kathmandu. Today, the mint has shifted to Biplin Mahal and only makes commemorative coins. The designs of Shah coins have been more or less the same since 1770, with similar symbols and motifs. However, with the end of Nepal rule in 1947, alloy coins were issued that showed King Tribhuvan wearing a Dhaka topi as opposed to a crown against a five-pointed star (below).

This design, in light of the end of the Rana rule, was meant to signify that the king was no different from a commoner.

Swayambeh Joshi explains in his book, Tribhuvan's successors Mahendra, Birendra and Gyanendra have also been similarly depicted. When monarchy was formally abolished by the Constituent Assembly in 2008, the figure of the kings were replaced by the ret (Imperial phallic) and the row. Only Re 1 and Re 2 were in circulation, and even those are now falling out of use.

In the digital age where all our transactions are built on data and do via the internet, it is important that focus be given to the cultural, religious, social and political significance of coins," says Suman Baner.

He compares this changing attitude towards physical money and especially coins to postage stamps. "Perhaps this is what progress looks like, but as we move to a cashless society, there is a possibility that we lose connection with our heritage and history. Now more than ever it is important that we retain and remember our past."

The Nepali Numismatic Society holds meetings regularly in Thapathali, and there are more and more younger attendees, meaning that coin-collecting is still popular. Traditionally it had been the tradition and the tourists who collected coins," says Baner. "But there are a young hobbyists who show good promise."

Says Govinda Neupane: "Coins bring several different avenues of our society together. We can study economics, language, history through coins, and we should preserve them for our future generations to look back and develop their own analysis and understanding."
TFN Fellowship 2022

Apply for the TFN Fellowship 2022. The intensive research training program is designed to tackle pressing issues the education inequity and quality of education in Nepal. Applicants must complete and submit an online application at https://www.timesfreernet.org.

Flash Fiction

Submit a work of fiction or non-fiction in any genre of less than 1,000 words for a chance to win $1,000 and get published in The Writer Magazine. Learn more at writing.com.
Deadline: 12 August

Art Exhibition

Sixth Kathmandu Art Gallery’s latest exhibition “The Cycle of Time” will be a continuation of celebrated artist SC Suman’s trilogy “Mithila Cosmos.”
10 December-13 January, Jodh Malot Revisited

AFK Christmas Market

Disaster and stop for local handcrafts, drain some wine and enjoy delicious Christmas salads under the Christmas lights at Alliance Française Kathmandu’s Christmas Market.
11 December, 10am-4pm, Alliance Française Kathmandu

Machchhegaun Hike

Spend this Saturday with nature by hiking through Machchhegaun, Bhairahawa, Dang and Chitwan. Go to hike for Nepal’s Facebook page for details.
11 December, 7:30am from Bhairahawa. Rent Rs 600

KIMFF 2021

The 7th Kathmandu International Film Festival will spotlight stories that reflect the realities of mountain communities in sustenance and promoting the rural environment.
Until 17 December (physical)

Here are some films to watch for:

Living with Snow Leopards
The film by WWF-Nepal documents how Mustang villagers struggle to manage the increasing conflict with wildlife.
10 December, 22:00pm

The Wall of Shadows
Ella Smuts’ cinematic debut “The Wall of Shadows” is a joint production between Poland, Germany, and Switzerland, and follows a family from the Saxony region who are forced to participate in a forced expulsion.
17-17 December

Chimamale Village Resort

Accommodated with peacemakers, Chimamale Village Resort is an ideal destination for those looking to escape the maddness of Kathmandu.
Chimamale, 980-660-0489

Riverside Springs Resort

Located just away from the bustle of the city, offers a vast swimming pool, cozy rooms and attentive service, and exciting activities like water sports and ballooning.
Narayani, 980-1801236

The Soaltee Kathmandu

Spend a relaxing day at the outdoor restaurant or at the rooftop Garden Terrace of The Soaltee Kathmandu. Get details on the staycation package online.
Pokhara Mall, 01-4227099

Green Valley Resort

Located 8 Km from Swayambhunath Temple, the resort is a perfect gateway for the weekend. For the first ray of sun, warm up, take a stroll around the Tangung Valley for a complete experience.
Swayambhunath Resort, 01-5440897

Sustainable Summits

Co-organised by the British Council and Sustainable Summits, Sustainable Summits – Climate solutions from the top of the world is directed by Simon Barrett and Shashank Sharma. Shastry will bring attention to the climate change impacts in the Hindu Kush Himalayas.
Find more at https://sustainablesummits2020.org
13 December, 12:30pm

The IcFall Doctor

The IcFall Doctor, directed by Sean Burch, is a 2017 Nepali film that will present a viewer’s perspective on life and death at the IcFall Doctor Anima Sherpa.
13 December

Chez Caroline

Chez Caroline is the go to for authentic French and continental cuisine in Nepal. Try the P tote mode au Chocolat and Oysters with garlic and fennel. Get the assorted box of doughnuts.
Kapan, 980-617-3034

The Workshop Eatery

Choose from the Workshop Eatery’s selection of sumptuous doughnuts and bagels. Try the carrot cake and Workshop BBQ cheeseburger, or get the assorted box of dougnuts.
Kapan, 980-647-1354

Belgian Waffles

Get mouth-watering waffles from Belgian Waffles Nepal. Order the classic Belgian Chocolate Waffle, or try the Koko’s Cream Waffle, Maple Waffle and more.
Dhulagiri, 980-615-6701

Achaar Ghar

Enjoy homestyle meals along with various choices of pickles prepared using recipes passed down from generations. Try the listen to the Kani music.
Baneshwor (01) 557-1952

Erma Restaurant

Erma Restaurant offers an upscale dining experience with chef’s定制ed dishes. Try the cream of lavender, rosemary-shiitake, and the Erna house burger.
Budhanilkantha, 980-807-7040

Weekend Weather

The mid-Congress line-in is a vital factor in the remaining high-altitude months. It is currently in the east for the last four months. This is because the monsoon has started, and the winds have come from the eastern central part of Asia, blowing down the mountains. The winds are strong and cold, bringing with them strong winds and cold temperatures, which can make it difficult for mountain climbers.

Air Quality Index

The visibility in Kathmandu is typically low due to the high altitude, but it can be improved with proper air pollution control measures. The Nepal Environment Agency recommends using air filters in vehicles and buildings to reduce indoor air pollution.

Our Pick

Jane Campion’s 2021 Western ‘The Power of the Dog’ based on the 1967 novel by Thomas Savage is a dark and enigmatic exploration of love, power and the 1950s Montana, with a great cast including Philip Seymour Hoffman and Joaquin Phoenix. The film follows two brothers who own a small farm and whose paths cross in a manner that is both troubling and compelling.

Siddhartha Boutique Hotel, Boudha

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About Town
To vac or not to vac

In Nepal or the US, having an option to vaccinate or not is a matter of privilege

I knew I wanted to get vaccinated as soon as the Covid-19 jobs were available to the general public in the US, and that was my turn I would have access to it.

Anjana Rajbhandary

It was not the same for people in Nepal, and I learned firsthand how hard it was to get a vaccine earlier this year. And a lot of it depended on whether you had the right connections.

People in Nepal were struggling to find their first doses, whereas in the US people did not want to get vaccinated against Covid-19 despite a raging pandemic. Those without access to jobs were confused with those who did not want to get vaccinated. With the Omicron variant, the debate is murkier.

All international students in the US must provide proof of immunizations against MMR (Measles, Mumps and Rubella), Varicella 1&2 (Tetanus, Diphtheria, Pertussis) and Meningococcal. I completely understand the reasoning behind requiring these vaccinations. It is to keep people safe, and I never entered my mind to argue the logic.

I did feel like my freedoms were being curtailed because I needed to show proof of these inoculations? No. Did I feel like someone was infringing on my choice? No. Did I have a problem getting the necessary vaccine for the greater good? No.

So why is it different with the Covid vaccine? The main reason to be vaccinated was so that I do not spread the infection further, as well as to protect myself. And yes, we all get vaccinated, the sooner we would be post-pandemic.

Which is why it surprised me that, unlike Nepal, where the vaccine acceptance rate is 97%, many in the US were choosing not to get jabbed because it curtailed their freedom of choice. The anti-vaxxers were also anti-maskers — and the puzzling thing was that they would however not protest against wearing seat belts to abide by laws against drinking and driving.

They say Pfizer and Moderna have side effects. Of course they do, every modern medicine has some side effect. Even junk food has horrible side effects, but that has not stopped people from eating fries and burgers.

And while anti-vaxxers are worried about their health, they have not taken the time to consider the health of millions of others they directly or indirectly interact with.

I had a lot of faith in my life in the US in liberal and progressive policy, so when I met with the comparatively conservative crowd, I felt I was pointless to argue the subject because the other had made up their minds and were not open to other opinions.

Without having brought out the gap between jabs and jabs not to get vaccinated against Covid-19 pandemic that global gap between the jabbed and jabbed not is growing, increasing the chances of mutant strains rapidly evolving.

In Nepal, we are not privileged enough to choose whether or not we get a vaccine for a disease that has killed millions. We cannot even choose which vaccine we want. All Covishield, VeroCell, or mRNA. We take whatever is available.

For most Nepali, if there is a disease and there is a way to protect yourself from it, you just do it. There are no what if’s.

The fact that you even have the option to decide if you want to get inoculated against the virus in a country which has the highest national total of fatalities from Covid-19, which has privileged people are in the US.

When you are a daily wage worker responsible for feeding and clothing your family, and when payment does not give you a weekly unemployment allowance for staying at home, unable to go to work, you have a right to get vacinated as soon as possible. The only way to stop that is to vaccinate and make it safer for everyone to be out again.

I would respect the choice of the anti-vaxxers not to get vaccinated if they stayed home and did not interact with the public. But they are out and about (and without mask) claiming that it is their fundamental right to do so.

Being a citizen means having a sense of responsibility towards oneself and others, and not using selfish excuses in the name of freedom to do whatever you want. It is a sensitive topic, and those who areโย нагेंगे and against the vaccine seem to be also the least informed about masks, the climate emergency, guns, abortion and politics. They live in social media echo-chambers where algorithms expose them to ever more radical posts. Recently, I asked a friend in the US if he had been vaccinated.

Later, I was told that it is impossible to ask such questions. But if someone is out in public, minding and educating, they need to be responsible about the health of those around them.

The boundary of individual’s freedom is when it infringes on someone else’s freedom.
The business of politics

Funding from business tycoons lubricates Nepal’s democracy, and undermines it

Ramesh Kumar

During the 2017 elections, Baburam Bhattarai’s Nepal Samata Party propped up the Nepali Congress (NC) everywhere across the country while seeking support in Gorkha, where Bhattarai himself would run, and Rasuwa where his party’s Prem Tamang was contesting.

But when it came to riding on the back of the project, support became a distant memory. To Baburam, Bhattarai accused his party’s Collage Tamang of selling out to a business class.

Bhattarai had registered his candidacy after convincing party chair Jhala Nath Khanal that Baburam Bhattarai, presumably with money secretly exchanged, to let him run for office.

The construction contractor who speculated on more money, while campaigning, would go on to win Rasuwa. A year later in an interview, Bhattarai accused his party colleague Tamang of selling out to Baburam Bhattarai.

Bhattarai’s opponent was Jhala Nath Khanal, another construction businessman who had the UML ticket. The race in Rasuwa was a battle of two business tycoons who could spend more money. Both candidates from the UML level parties had extravagant motorcades, and distributed cash to buy votes back.

What happened in Rasuwa in 2017 is a reflection of Nepal’s current electoral system—competent candidates have no chance against powerful tycoons who have bought election tickets from party bosses.

“Even as they spend extraordinary money to woo voters, political parties are not transparent about funding in official reports.”

Donations from businesses are the primary source of funding for all political parties, and that is the nest set in.

However, the amount of financial support received from well-wishers, supporters and businesses are not broken down in the accounts of any of the parties. In fact, they are not mentioned at all.

The fact that all financial assistance is provided in cash and not through the banking system makes it easy for parties to circumvent institutions that oversee election management, even though the Political Parties Act 2017 stipulates that any transactions above Rs 25,000 should go through the banking system along with the details of donors.

There is a lack of transparency when it comes to details of any fixed assets in the parties’ audit report. In many cases, private donors pick up the tabs for the rectification of party offices just to be above the board, like what the NC’s Umesh Shrestha did to get himself appointed state minister of health by Prime Minister Deuba.

Nepal’s political-business nexus began during the post-Panchayat era after the multiparty system encouraged collaboration and joint pro- poor initiatives. This has, at times, led to political and business parties becoming more embedded in subsequent elections.

When political parties have to spend money to win elections, they start cultivating business tycoons. Then, it is you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours,” explains economist Khadga Acharya.

Over the years, watching from the sidelines was not enough, and Nepal’s rich directly entered politics as the country began its transition into a federal republic following the end of the Maoist conflict.

Former Finance Secretary Ramshree Khanal resigned in 2011 after Finance Minister Shakti Mohan Adhikari sought the counsel of industrialist Bimal Chandhary during the budget formulation process.

Nowadays Nepal’s political parties are at present governed not by institutional systems, but the will of individual leaders who mobilise money by helping businessmen launder it.

“This practice was introduced by Giriraj Prasad Koirala in the NC and has been continued by both UML Chair KP Oli and Marxist Chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal,” says Khanal.

Democracy too costly for women politicians

Heavy election expenses deter women candidates from running for office in the 2023 elections

Laxmi Banes

Kiran Shrestha was a candidate from the UML party twice in the 2009 and 2017 elections in the last election, but twice has been elected to the House through the Proportional Representation (PR) system in the 2013 polls. She entered the political arena as a student leader in the past Panchayat period, but in 2009 she had sold her private school to pay off the hiring election debt. Today she is Far-Western Province in charge for thebreakaway OPM (Unified Socialist).

But as even Nepal’s political parties and leaders lift the campaign trail ahead of the next election in 2023, Shrestha has been living with the financial consequences of her two unsuccessful runs.

“We have to think twice if we were allowed to run for office this time around, with the burden of election expenses,” says Shrestha. “Securing election funding is a struggle for us, especially for women.”

Costly elections have had a direct impact on women campaigning for office. Indeed, the number of women elected to office has steadily declined during each of Nepal’s three post-conflict Constituent Assembly elections: from 197 in 2008 to 176 in 2013.

Similarly, 90 women were elected to office in 2015, six of whom were selected through the first past the post system.

While direct elections are for Nepal’s male politicians, it seems women are only able to get into the legislature through the proportionate representation quota.

“Money is the main reason why parties do not select us as candidates, which means capable women are unlikely to come forward and run,” says a UML leader who did not want to be named.

Former Minister Kamla Roka of the Marxist Centre was elected to Parliament from East Rukum in 2017, but the debt she incurred during her election campaign is a constant source of worry.

“My expenses were relatively low compared to the other, but I still have not been able to pay off the money we spent to feed and accommodate staff,” she says.

Roka, who represents the minority community in her constituency, adds that during the campaign women, Dalits and Nepal’s low-income communities would face uphill battles in winning elections.

“If our electoral system continues to open this way, only the rich and powerful, politicians, and interpersonal contacts, are able to run and win elections in Nepal,” she asks.

Women MPs are so heavily in debt that they cannot afford to stay in Kathmandu even with the allowances for legislators.

“A great chunk of money goes towards rent, travelling to my constituency, paying a love to the party, supporting various causes and organisations—which my salary and allowances are not able to cover,” adds Roka.

Kamla Roka is a feminist, and Anjana Roka BK is an MP from Bajhang, and says that her monthly expenses including travel back and forth from Kathmandu and contributions to the party average Rs 83,600 every month against her MPL (allowance of Rs 64,000).

“Running for elections is impossible for Nepal women, except few, in the current climate,” she says. “If this continues, no honest politician can afford to stand for office.”

MP Tham Maya Thapa was elected from Myagdi in Nepal’s first election under the proportional system in 1991. “In those days, we would be fed by the families we met along the campaign trail, and if there was nothing else, there was always roasted corn and beans that we would bring with us,” recalls Thapa.

Despite that, she defeated her opponent by 5,800 votes. Thapa says there is no way she can afford to campaign these days.

Selma Khatun, a former journalist who is now the deputy chief of Pohkara Municipality of Paro, has also taken on loans to pay for expenses after being elected to office.

“Campaigning in 2023 is going to cost a million rupees at the least,” says Khatun, considered by many to be the mayoral or state parliamentarian contender to watch in the upcoming election. “I had financial support from my family in the last election, but how long can I go on asking them to shoulder such a burden?”

Khatun and Anjana Roka BK agree that there is no space for integrity in Nepal politics given the financial constraints faced by many elected and hopeful leaders.

“I have seen many capable women decide not to run for office because they realise how costly it is,” says Khatun. “Parties pick candidates based on their electability determined by how much money they have and are willing to spend. Leaders who are financially willing to put in the work are not considered at all.”

Minister for Women, Children and Senior Citizens Uma Regmi has run for office multiple times, and the Nepal Congress leader says that even after elections are fought and won, women leaders have to keep paying back loans for a long time.

She has been advancing a fully proportional electoral system and adds that elections have become a battle for corruption, concluding that the first past the post system is actually undermining democracy.

Kamla Roka is also a proponent of a fully proportional electoral system. The leader from the Marxist Centre party says: “If we want to select dedicated leaders who have made great sacrifices to serve the people, then all of Nepal’s political parties must actively work on an alternative to Nepal’s current electoral system.”
Indeed, public sector enterprises like Harisiddhi Brick and Shikshakti Paper factories were privatised under the first elected government led by Girija Prasad Koirala, and turned into prime real estate.

The Ministry of Finance refunded value-added tax (VAT) to entrepreneurs on consumer goods for almost a decade after 2008, essentially putting VAT paid by Nepali citizens into the pocket of businesses, prompting questions of policy irregularities by the IMF.

Similarly, other NC leaders like former finance minister Ram Sharan Mahat formed the Tax Commission in 2015 which gave tax cuts worth Rs2 billion to big businesses, the case related to which is still pending in the courts.

More recently, Finance Minister Janardan Sharma is alleged to have made policy changes to benefit special interests, like the Shanker Group, through a bill to replace the budget brought by the Oli government.

Of late, businesses have also been actively involved in the infighting within parties that has characterised recent Nepali politics.

The photo of NCP co-chairs K P Oli and Dahal having lunch with red rice at the home of business tycoon Durga Prasai in a closed party unity went viral and prompt widespread ridicule.

The two leaders also held several discussions at the residence of construction contractor Shrestha Prasad Adhikari who was unreachable because of his proximity to Dahal, as well as at homes of businessmen like Navin Govind Shrestha and Ajeya Raj Shumargi. Shumargi often acts as a frontman for Dahal's business dealings.

Businessmen like Capt Rameshwar Thapia and Moti Dugar were actively involved in negotiations related to party unification between UML leaders like K P Sharma Oli and Madhav Kumar Nepal, who often met at their private residences.

Similarly, Oli's name has been linked to the Yeti Group, and the death of its founder Ang Tsering Sherpa in a helicopter crash in 2019 was a big blow to the former Prime Minister who had close personal dealings with him. Sherpa served as Oli's fixer, and was rewarded with coveted real estate and other deals for his conglomerate.

Entrepreneurs who transition into politics do so with the intention of influencing the state machinery to get business-related benefits. Moreover, interactions between business and politics are not limited to Nepali figures, as evidenced by the audiotape of Krishna Bahadur Mahara asking a Chinese businessman for Rs500 million on behalf of the Maoists during Constituent Assembly elections in 2013.

To be sure, politicians have always been making licensing and policies easier at the behest of banking, insurance, medical education, telecommunication, sectors as well as in the stock market, allowing a select few to take advantage of the resulting decrease in competition.

Congress leader and former vice-chairman of the National Planning Commission Govinda Raj Prakar notes that money has become the lubricant in Nepali politics. In fact, voters themselves seem to seek out leaders who can take care of their financial interests.

"Unless we clean up our democratic system, our democracy is headed to the edge of a cliff," he says.

Former Election Commissioner chief Srijay Pokharel, in his recent article "Political Finance Management: Opportunities for Electoral Reform" has proposed ideas for electoral reform, including the provision of grants to political parties to manage election-related expenses.

This proposal is not a new concept. Past governments have discussed this and former Finance Minister Prakash Chandra Lobani even made a related proposal in the 2004 budget.

UML leader Surentra Pandey argues that if political financing is to be made transparent, the government should provide financial support based on the votes received by each party.

Former Finance Secretary Ramshro Subedi argues that political parties should seek donations from Nepali citizens, which would subsequently make them more accountable to the public.

Achyut Wagle, a professor of economics at Kathmandu University, notes that while government funding for parties is a viable option in an ideal democracy, it is questionable whether a country like Nepal can do it honestly.

Wagle remarks: "It is more important to have transparency in political financing. Selling political positions for money has become the norm, and we need to ensure a democracy where businessmen cannot buy their way to power."
CRAFTED WITH PASSION

Exquisitely rich in color and refreshing aroma, “Gorkha Craft” is moderately hoppy with balanced bitterness and full flavor of toasted Ruby malt.