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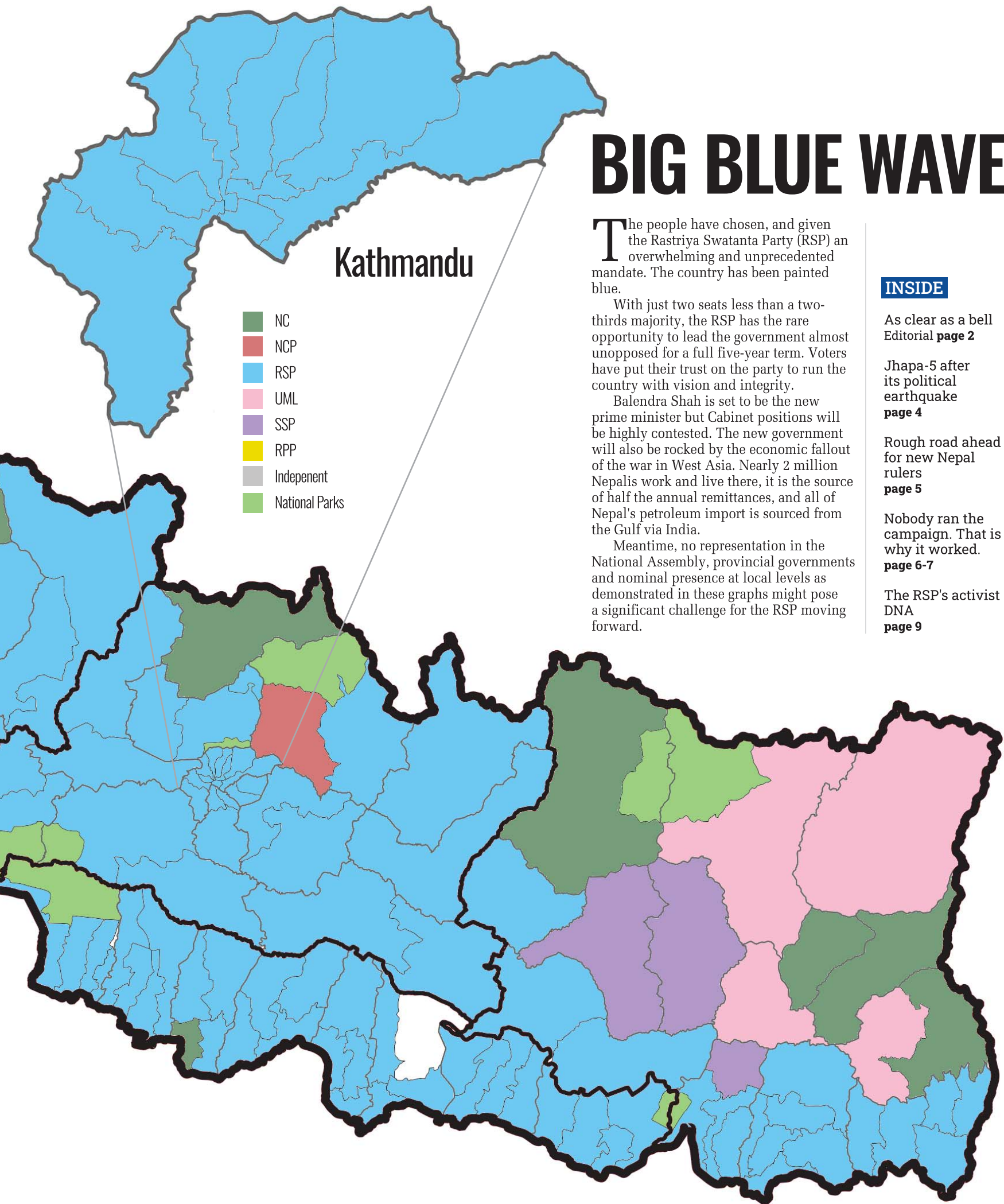
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BIG BLUE WAVE

The people have chosen, and given the Rastriya Swatanta Party (RSP) an overwhelming and unprecedented mandate. The country has been painted blue.

With just two seats less than a two-thirds majority, the RSP has the rare opportunity to lead the government almost unopposed for a full five-year term. Voters have put their trust on the party to run the country with vision and integrity.

Balendra Shah is set to be the new prime minister but Cabinet positions will be highly contested. The new government will also be rocked by the economic fallout of the war in West Asia. Nearly 2 million Nepalis work and live there, it is the source of half the annual remittances, and all of Nepal's petroleum import is sourced from the Gulf via India.

Meantime, no representation in the National Assembly, provincial governments and nominal presence at local levels as demonstrated in these graphs might pose a significant challenge for the RSP moving forward.

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As clear as a bell

The RSP now needs institutions and civil society to give the party the chance to reboot Nepal

Sonia Awale







With a near two-thirds majority, the RSP has the chance that no other party in Nepal has ever had: to reboot how Nepal is run.

Winning an election with such an overwhelming majority was one thing, but running an efficient government will be a whole new ball game. From the start, it will not be easy because the country is running straight into a major economic crisis due to the West Asia war (page 5).

The RSP with its majority can now form a stable government for the next five years, but there are issues that may surface with the choice of Cabinet members and other appointments. PM candidate Balendra Shah and party chair Rabi Lamichhane both have big egos and are ambitious, and Nepal cannot afford rumours of a split be a self-fulfilling prophecy (page 4).

No elected government in Nepal has ever completed a full five-year term, so the RSP has a chance to rewrite history. Besides egos and the West Asia crisis, the party has other challenges: legacy parties rule local governments and the National Assembly.

The RSP's rejection of provincial elections and federalism in 2022 did not seem to have affected its votes in the Madhes, but local governments at the periphery will be trying their level best to make it difficult for the centre. The RSP's strategy should be not to alienate the old parties, but try to win them over and collaborate to build bases outside of

Parties	FPTP	PR	Total seats
 RSP	125	57	182
 NC	18	20	38
 UML	9	16	25
 NCP	8	9	17
 SSP	3	4	7
 RPP	1	4	5
Independent	1	--	1



RSP / FACEBOOK

major urban centres.

Some think Balendra Shah's aloof and uncommunicative nature could hide an authoritarian streak. And Rabi Lamichhane has been scathing about media exposés of his alleged wrongdoings. Despite this, the RSP's strategy should be to avoid alienating civil society any more than necessary.

The media's role in a democracy is to play the adversarial check-and-balance role, especially when one party is so dominant. However, the press must give up its corrosive, cynical coverage that almost hopes the RSP will fail from day one -- especially since social media offers no help on that score.

There are so many things wrong with

Nepal that even at the best of times, and even with a supermajority government, it would be impossible to solve them all overnight. But voters are an impatient lot, and they expect a lot pronto.

TO-DO-LIST

Effective governance takes time, and the RSP must be given the chance even if it fails to make course-corrections. Shah and Lamichhane, on the other hand, must show restraint and prove their critics wrong. Instead of posting inflammatory content on their social media feeds and deploying cyber militias to troll critics into silence, they could try developing thicker skin.

The RSP could work on a clear strategy and plan of action to get this country back on its feet. The party's rise was built on emotion, not ideology. But every party needs ideals, just saying it is against corruption is not enough. Its stance on federalism, secularism, inclusion, need to be clarified.

The RSP's lofty promise to bring young Nepalis home will be easier said than done. What will they return to? How can we make this worthwhile? And how do we provide jobs for the other 500,000 Nepali youth who enter the job market every year?

Nepal will need liberal policies regarding domestic investment and FDI to reform manufacturing, industry, tourism and infrastructure to ensure jobs at home, while also working toward achieving the 7% annual growth rate projected by the RSP.

Rabi Lamichhane has introduced the term 'development diplomacy' to steer the country away from traditional geopolitics toward economic partnerships with India, China, and other international partners. But the environmental cost of mega projects must also be taken into account in the rush to development.

The RSP's anti-corruption drive, implementing a high-level commission to investigate assets acquired since 1990, must also include judicial reform. Meanwhile, quality health services and education must be affordable and accessible.

Cleaning up the bureaucracy will be critical. Electoral reform including election spending and out-of-country voting must be a priority from the get go.

It is a long to-do list. But for the very first time, the Nepali people are genuinely excited about their new leaders and the promised transformation. Not another Switzerland or Singapore, people just want better development, more efficient service delivery, meaningful jobs at home and an accountable government.

That should not be too much to ask. 🇳🇵

Trending Online



The Girl Dad of Nepal

Mamata Kumari Yadav's father prioritised his daughters' education so they would do well in life. Mamata is now a civil servant, and her siblings are a doctor, a microbiologist, and an MPH. International Women's Day profile at nepalitimes.com

 Most reached and shared on Facebook

Balen takes Jhapa and Nepal

by Vishad Raj Onta
Balendra Shah's win and the RSP majority government is an opportunity to rethink the country's political culture and institutionalise change. Details on how Shah took Jhapa and Nepal online.

 Most popular on X



Nepal's mandate for change

by Sanjay Upadhyaya
The first big hurdle for the RSP-led government will be managing governance. While the party's rise is fueled by hopes of reform, turning those hopes into real policies will require strong administration, discipline, and teamwork. Story and comments on our website.

 Most commented

The diaspora and Nepal's Blue Sweep

Many Nepali migrant workers who were returning to vote were stuck as flights were grounded last week due to the ongoing conflict in West Asia. But they are hopeful about the new government. Full story online.

 Most visited online page

Letters

ELECTION

I have to agree with Sanjay Upadhyaya, this is not a question of being pessimistic, but pragmatic (Nepal's mandate for change', Sanjay Upadhyaya, nepalitimes.com). It is easier to win votes than lead one of the poorest countries in the world. It remains to be seen how and what this new government does. But what has happened in Nepal is absolutely a historic mandate

Charlie Lambe

■ The biggest challenge was holding a clean and peaceful election to dismantle the corrupt and inept parties in Nepal. The author is overly pessimistic and unnecessarily cautious about the new political changes that are dawning in the country. No

matter what lies ahead, the country is not going back to the old days. India has no other option but to work together as a good brotherly neighbour. Congratulations to Nepal.

Omarla Mo

■ Thank God the corrupt politicians and parties are gone. Best wishes to Nepal and her lovely people.

Takeshi Ohkawara

JACINDA ARDERN

Rather than reading a popular book, Nepal's new leader needs to understand the demographic they are working for ('Ending Nepal's malestream politics', Aditi Adhikari, #1301). The context of Jacinda Ardern's book might be helpful in Nepal, where the development opportunities are plenty, we just need a leader to act on them.

Ram Kushawaha



FUEL SHORTAGE

The new government will certainly face major challenges from the outset ('Rough road ahead for Nepal's rulers', Sonia Awale, page 4). Energy conservation and a push to increase renewables should be part of a response as should promotion of exports and import substitution.

David Seddon

■ We are not reading any book about the 'image' of leadership, which is an eternal interest of liberals no matter the context. Suggest some books on the scientific development of society from scratch and fighting foreign interference like Singapore or China have done.

Bhethinu Chutinu

■ Enough suggestions. Nepalis will find their own way of leading.

Bhumi Limbu

JHAPA-5 POLLS

Nepal needs to change its system from proportional representation to direct representation ('Jhapa-5 after its political earthquake', Ayusha Chalise, nepalitimes.com, page 4). This would help create a more stable and less corrupt government. Election results should also be published within 24 hours, similar to the practice in countries like Bangladesh, the UK, and Australia

Hossain Siddiqui

Online Package



SAVING MOTHERS AND BABIES

Surya Bhatta and his team at One Heart Worldwide work in some of Nepal's most vulnerable communities to improve maternal and neonatal health care. Watch on YouTube.



PASSION FOR PASHMINA

In seven steps, experts demonstrate how balls of nondescript cashmere yarn are weaved into some of the finest luxury garments. Watch the video on Nepali Times' YouTube channel.

1,000 Words



BANGLADESH EMBASSY / FACEBOOK

RAMADAN MUBARAK: Bangladesh Ambassador to Nepal Md Shafiqur Rahman (in foreground) hosted an Iftar dinner on 10 March in honour of resident ambassadors and heads of mission in Nepal and also showcasing his country's culture, traditions and heritage. Bangladesh held its own post-uprising election a month before Nepal's 5 March election. The main difference was that in Bangladesh, the new party and candidates did not fare well, while in Nepal new candidates swept the polls.

Times

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Jhapa-5 after its political earthquake

Voters in the UML's traditional stronghold were put off by K P Oli

Ayusha Chalise in Jhapa

Balendra Shah of the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) scored a decisive win here with 68,348 votes, defeating four-time former prime minister K P Oli of the UML who got only 18,734 votes.

The Jhapa-5 victory marks a moment when Nepal's political centre of gravity shifted from cadre-based party machinery to a youth-backed reform movement centred on former Kathmandu mayor Balendra Shah. For decades, Nepali elections have been powered by cadre-based party structures.

The UML enlisted 400 out of 450 voters of Barhasudi village in Gauriganj Rural Municipality 4 in a ceremony attended by K P Oli himself. However, the outcome showed the limited effectiveness of traditional structures in the current political environment, which favours digital outreach, youth networks, and personality-driven support.

A district-level UML cadre in Jhapa, who asked not to be named, admitted the limitations of traditional organisation: "We have the organisation down to every ward, but this time that did not matter as much. Voters were hostile during door-to-door campaigning. People were voting for Balen as a person, not for a party. Our cadres did their work, but the voter mood had changed."

Traditional party loyalty alone may no longer be sufficient to secure electoral victory in Nepal. The Nepali Congress (NC) positioned Gagan Thapa as its



SUJAN GAUTAM

prime-ministerial face, while the UML continued to campaign around Oli.

"What guaranteed the RSP's success is that it had established itself as an alternative while positioning Balen Shah for the PM post," explains political analyst Bishnu Sapkota. Even a renewed NC under Gagan Thapa was burdened by the baggage of old politics because technically his party was only half-new.

Sapkota notes that Sher Bahadur Deuba had already sanctioned the party's PR list and other electoral processes; consequently, people saw nothing new in the Gagan-led NC because he had no time to lead it before the elections.

The parliamentary system does not allow voters to directly elect the prime minister, yet this election

resembled a presidential-style contest centred on Balen Shah.

The RSP's campaign messaging framed the vote as a mandate to make Shah prime minister, effectively turning parliamentary ballots into a referendum on his leadership. The strategy proved effective: with an almost two-thirds majority in Parliament, Shah now has the numbers to lead the country for five years.

DURABLE GOVERNMENT

Nepal has drifted off unstable coalition-dominated politics. For many voters here, the logic was straightforward: elect enough RSP candidates and Shah becomes prime minister.

"I voted for Balen because I wanted the RSP to form a majority government and him to lead it,"

says Jhapa-5 voter Ranjit Subedi. Shah attracted cadre-like loyalty without cadres, a follower base driven more by sentiment and aspiration than by party machinery.

Sapkota notes that personality-based politics is fairly new: "Rabi Lamichhane started this trend during the 2022 election as his popularity made the RSP the 4th largest party in Parliament last time."

"Balen, on the other hand, has maintained an enigmatic aura that has captivated people to an extent that they do not enquire about his vision, which comes with its own risk of public disappointment if he fails to deliver," he adds.

With a near two-thirds majority, Shah has the parliamentary numbers for government stability, a rare achievement in Nepal

coalition-dominated politics. Yet whether he can maintain the RSP's unity and the youth movement's enthusiasm for five years remains to be seen.

Sapkota warns: "This level of public support empowers a leader, as this is stronger than a mere formal electoral mandate, but it comes with the risk of the system being overridden by a superman-like figure."

The Jhapa-5 victory represents more than a symbolic contest between Nepal's political establishment and a rising, youth-backed reform movement. Following the state killing of GenZ protestors on 8 September, Oli's political authority eroded fundamentally.

A judicial investigation committee led by Gauri Bahadur Karki formed to investigate the violence, deaths, and property damage on 8-9 September submitted its 900-plus page report to the interim government on Sunday. The report is said to recommend action against those found responsible, including Oli and members of his cabinet and security apparatus.

Prime Minister Sushila Karki has said her government will publish the main conclusions after reviewing it with the home ministry and cabinet.

This election result is not merely a party winning by a landslide, but a departure from the type of political culture that the old parties represented. Even if RSP does not deliver, society has moved on. The question is whether the 2026 election is a genuine transition, or merely a pendulum swing before the next disillusionment sets in. 🇳🇵

NMB BANK एनएमबि बैंक



ITB Berlin

Nepal Tourism Board participated in ITB Berlin 2026 alongside 26 industry stakeholders. The delegation introduced Trail-Based Tourism, featuring four new trekking routes across Koshi Province. A Nepal Evening hosted by the Nepali Embassy drew around 200 guests. Germany ranked 9th among Nepal's source markets in 2025, with over 30,000 visitors. Some Nepali delegates were stuck in Gulf airports because of the war, and the conflict is expected to impact spring season arrivals.

Japan & SAARC

The Embassy of Japan in Kathmandu and the SAARC Secretariat signed an addendum to the JENESYS 2025 programme, enabling 20 participants from South Asian member states to visit Japan to observe its development, technology, and culture. Japan contributed JPY13,000,000 for the program.

NEPSE

Nepal's stock market rose steadily before the 5 March election, gaining over 57 points across two days on positive investor sentiment, before a four-day trading halt for elections and International Women's Day. When trading resumed on 9 March, NEPSE surged 4%, briefly crossing 2,800 points and triggering a circuit breaker shortly after opening. The overall trend reflects a bullish response to political stability. However, the government's reduced FY 2026/27 budget ceiling may introduce caution in the weeks ahead.

LPG Shortage

The Department of Commerce, Supplies and Consumers Protection raised concerns about cooking gas shortages in Nepal, asking the NOC to explain the situation and present a resolution plan. NOC has attributed the shortage to panic buying and denies supply disruptions from India. Daily demand has risen from a normal 100,000-110,000 cylinders to 130,000. However, India is said to have only a week's worth of LPG stock left and has prioritised household consumers (page 5).

ADB \$40M Loan

The Asian Development Bank approved a \$40M soft loan for Nepal's Digital Transformation Project. The project aims to develop a citizen service portal, improve the national social registry, establish a government-wide data exchange platform, digitise 11 high-impact government services, and strengthen cybersecurity. The World Bank had previously approved a \$50M loan for the same project.



Organic Lumbini

Lumbini Province's 15-year plan aims at converting its hill districts Gulmi, Palpa, Arghakhanchi, Pyuthan, Rolpa, and East Rukum to organic production, including grain. The strategy prioritises improved seeds, using fallow land, and being export-oriented. Lumbini accounts for 14.3% of Nepal's agricultural GDP.



VR air training

Loft Dynamics, EASA, and Airbus Helicopters have launched a virtual reality helicopter safety training in Kathmandu. The month-long program features a Loft Dynamics H125 virtual reality flight simulator. All Nepali helicopter pilots are required to complete four hours of training on mountain flying and emergency scenarios.

Galaxy S26 series

Samsung Nepal is set to launch the Galaxy S26 series. The lineup includes the S26, S26+, and S26 Ultra, with prices ranging from Rs133,999 to Rs293,999. The S26 Ultra introduces the industry's first built-in Privacy Display. 24-month EMI and exchange options are available.

GoN Housing Program

The government has allocated Rs750 million to construct 1,000 new homes under the Janata Housing Program, and replace thatched roofs in 5,000 houses under the Safe Citizen Housing Program. Implementation targets districts in Madhes, Lumbini, Sudurpaschim, and Karnali provinces, focusing on Dalit, marginalised, and low-income communities. Grants of up to Rs 330,000 are provided per household.

Xiaomi in Madhes

Xiaomi opened two official service centers in Madhes Province, in Birganj and Janakpur. Operated by Teledirect, the centers offer repair services, technical inspections, and support for Xiaomi smartphones, wearables, and IoT devices using genuine parts. To mark the launch Xiaomi is providing free servicing and software upgrades for one month.

MAW Buy Back

MAW Earthmovers, JCB's authorised Nepal distributor, launched a Buy Back Guarantee scheme for the JCB 3DX Super Backhoe Loader. Customers who buy the machine can get back 50% of the original price after 4 years or 8,000 operating hours, if standard operating and maintenance conditions are met.



Hyatt Women's Day

Hyatt Place Butwal celebrated International Women's Day on 8 March by recognising its female employees. The hotel currently employs 47 women, making up 30% of its workforce, across marketing, sales, front office, and recreation management. Female staff noted the hotel's emphasis on safety, work-life balance, and leadership opportunities.



Swine Flu in Parbat

African swine flu has killed 46 pigs in Parbat district, alarming commercial farmers. Pigs in Kushma municipality displayed symptoms such as fever, nasal discharge, and loss of appetite. Rapid kit tests confirmed the disease. The Veterinary Hospital and Livestock Service issued guidance to farmers to disinfect pig sties, separate infected animals, bury dead pigs, and prevent contact with wild boars. Parbat has over 40 commercial pig farms.

Rough road ahead for new Nepal rulers

RSP government will plunge headlong into an economic crisis caused by the West Asia war

Sonia Awale

Amidst the euphoria in Nepal about the RSP's landslide victory, the party's future government possibly led by Balendra Shah will plunge headlong into an energy and economic crisis sparked by the war in West Asia.

Nepal gets all its diesel, petrol, gas and aviation fuel from India and lacks a strategic stockpile to buffer against shortages. The United States has unsanctioned Russian crude oil to India for one month, but India will only export refined petroleum products to Nepal after meeting its own domestic demand.

As it is, India has only 10 days of stockpile of cooking gas and it is giving preference to household use. Energy experts say new oil and gas supplies from Russia and elsewhere will take another month to arrive at Indian ports.

"This conflict didn't develop overnight, yet we did nothing to augment our reserves. Clearly, we didn't manage procurement anticipating supply disruptions," says economist Pushkar Bajracharya. "This crisis is only going to intensify, so in the short term, it means fuel prices will increase as will the cost of goods and services."

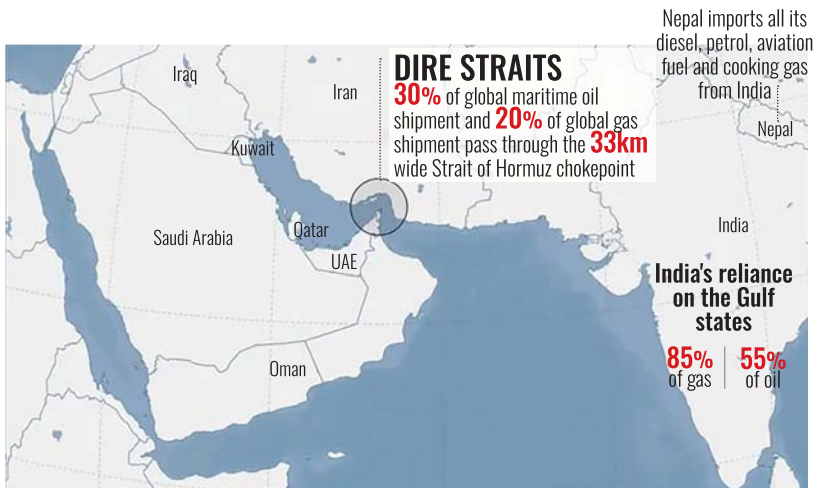
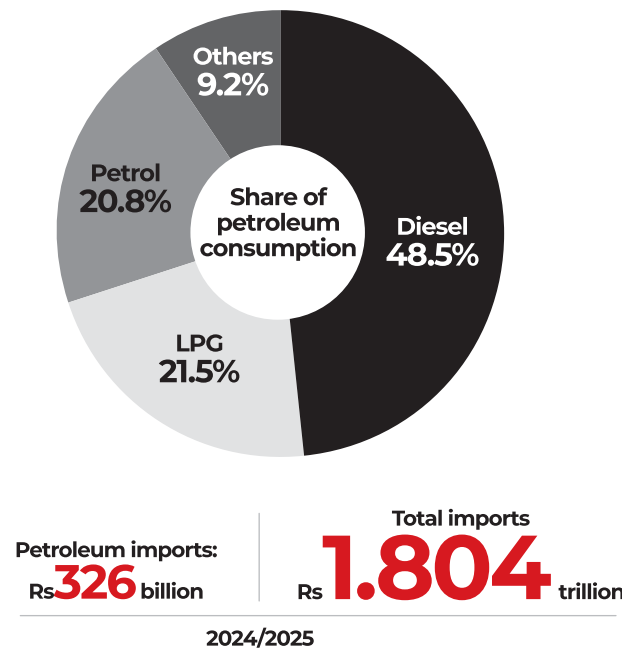
The conflict has escalated, seriously disrupting global petroleum supplies. Nearly 20% of the world's oil and gas moves out of the Strait of Hormuz which is now blocked. The Persian Gulf makes up most of the oil and liquefied natural gas supplied to Japan (75%), India (50%) and China (38%). Crude oil prices have nearly doubled to \$100 a barrel this week.

Fuel stoppages from India have happened before, notably during the 2015 Blockade. But Nepal could be better placed this time to cushion the shock because of the proliferation of battery-operated vehicles, and electrification of household cooking to some extent.

"The increase in electric vehicles provides some relief, but it is not enough," says energy economist and former Water Resources Minister Dipak Gyawali. "Most critical services still run on diesel, and they cannot be



ADAM STERN



replaced overnight."

Nepal's expanding road network means diesel and petrol consumption is also increasing. Imports reached a record high of Rs334.10 billion in FY 2021/22, following which there was a decline for three consecutive years. Imports dropped by 4.29% compared to a year before in 2024/25 which was worth Rs287.65 billion.

Between mid-July 2025 and mid-January 2026, Nepal imported Rs58.27 billion worth of diesel and Rs33.07 billion worth of petrol. Additionally, Rs9.93 billion was spent on air turbine fuel import. Meanwhile, the import of LPG has increased by 2.14% to 321,089 tonnes, worth Rs31.85 billion in the first seven months of the current fiscal year.

If the war drags on, there will

be a critical shortage of aviation fuel that could also hurt tourism at the start of the trekking and mountaineering season. There is already a nationwide shortage of cooking gas which is used by 44% of Nepali households, and by nearly 70% households in Kathmandu.

The fuel crisis will have a knock-on effect on the economy which the RSP government will have to tackle on an emergency footing as soon as it comes into office. The priority would be to cap fuel prices with subsidies, control hoarding, and in the longer term expedite the switch to electricity for transportation and cooking.

MONEY IN

The other impact will be on jobs in West Asia and remittances. Nearly half the \$11 billion a year Nepalis

send home every year comes from West Asian countries. Nepal's hard currency reserves have hit a record high \$21.09 billion, but that cash will be of no use if there is no fuel to buy.

A sharp drop in remittances due to the collapse of the economies of the Gulf states if the war is prolonged will have a multiplier impact particularly on Nepal's household expenses and the country's economy in general. This in turn will have a knock-on effect on investment, and affect the RSP government's main agenda which is to create jobs at home.

The vicious cycle will then mean that more Nepalis will want to migrate for overseas jobs, but options in the Gulf may not be available.

The RSP's ministers in government will have to come up with innovative ways to re-integrate Nepalis forced to return because they lose their jobs, or for safety reasons. There are nearly 2 million Nepalis across the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and another 7,000 mainly women caregivers in Israel.

"Other than the impact on remittances and the economy, there could be the additional challenge of rescuing over 2 million Nepalis in West Asia if it comes to that," says Bajracharya. "We don't have the resources, and we will have to rely on India's logistical help."

The RSP's main vote bank was among global Nepalis, who could not cast ballots themselves but influenced families and friends back home to choose the party. Social media was abuzz with slogans that promoted how choosing the RSP would bring their children back home from the Gulf.

"The RSP got a majority, and that's a good thing but voters came together to oppose UML, NC and the Maoists. But there is no clear ideology or philosophy, so while their slogan to bring Nepalis back from the Gulf sounds nice, what would they come back to?" asks Gyawali.

The Nepali diaspora in the Gulf that influenced the electorate so effectively will now be looking at how the government it helped get to power in Kathmandu will help as war engulfs the region.

There is an almost unrealistically high expectation of the RSP, and the party may not even get the customary 100-day honeymoon period. The cabinet could be put together easily enough, but the bureaucracy, judiciary, police, and the Upper House are all populated by loyalists of the old parties.

Despite bad blood, the RSP will have to work together with all parties in the face of the crisis unleashed by the war. And Nepal's politicised foreign policy must be galvanised to deal with the crisis.

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Nobody ran the campaign

How did an election symbol like the Bell jump off a ballot

Nobel Rimal

The Bell that rang in the new

A daughter stands in her family's living room, frantically ringing an actual घण्टी at her father. He is a lifelong Nepali Congress (NC) voter. She tells him his party loyalty is as humiliating as a daughter eloping.

He looks visibly defeated, and because of RSP's landslide sweep in this election, he has no reply. She is not a party member. Nobody told her to do this.

Multiply this actual family scene by hundreds of thousands of households across Nepal and you find the reason for the RSP tsunami. Children ringing bells at parents over dinner. Aunties shaking bells at legacy party candidates on their morning walks. Taxi drivers, lifelong UML supporters, cheerfully announcing they have switched.

And overseas, Nepalis in Dubai and Doha, Sydney and Seattle, calling home to deliver just one instruction: "चुपचाप घण्टीमा छाप"।

How did an election symbol like the Bell jump off a ballot paper and become weaponised for generational shame?



The RSP's very absence became its strategic advantage. Without a chain of command for content, every post felt peer-to-peer. Supporters built communities instead of following orders. Network effects took over: one person posts, three friends remix it, their followers adapt it for their own local context, and the message multiplies without a single directive from party headquarters.

A TikTok from Kathmandu featuring Balendra Shah gets remixed by someone in Birganj who dubs it in Bhojपुरी. A supporter in Pokhara takes the same "अर्बाक बार बालेन सरकार" audio and films it over footage of the city's broken road.

A Nepali worker in Dubai films himself shaking his phone at the camera, captioning it "I can't vote but my family can". The content stays structurally the same (bell + emotion) but the surface changes every time. The format is the constant. The context is the variable. A single post multiplies into a thousand pieces of local content without anyone coordinating it.

Legacy parties spent money on reach. RSP's strategy built reach for free, because participation itself was the product.

The Bell, blazer and brand



The RSP's 2026 campaign is a case study in how a symbol becomes so participatory and instinctive, that citizens start campaigning on behalf of a party they never formally joined. It may look like a cult, but it is a phenomenon no political party in Nepal has ever pulled off.

The ghost in the machine

The 3-year-old RSP entered the 2026 race without the campaign infrastructure that legacy parties considered essential. It has no sister organisations, no vanguard student unions, no established cadre networks.

In a country where ground reach and organisation wins elections, this looked like a fatal handicap. Established parties had spent decades building a top-down machinery: youth wings that mobilise on orders and unions within government. But it was all hollow and manufactured.

That is why when the NC or UML posted a policy manifesto, it barely got 200 shares. When a 19-year-old posts an AI video on TikTok of Balendra Shah swinging a bell like a Kung Fu Hustle weapon, it gets 5 million views.

Run the sensory test. The UML's Sun symbol is only visual. You see it on a ballot, on a flag. You cannot hear a sun. You cannot perform a sun. Nobody walks into a room and 'suns' at an opponent.

The NC's Tree symbol is also only seen. It communicates nothing as a verb. Nobody 'trees' the father across the dinner table. Ujyalo Nepal's lightbulb was the most passive symbol of all, it just sits there being always on.

The Bell had rare resonance as an election symbol. It is a verb (to ring), a sound (tintinnabulation), a physical action (shaking), and a metaphor (wake-up call). घण्टी is participatory by design. You do not just see it, you perform it.

It works as a metaphor: wake up. It works as a taunt: we are coming ("हामी आँदै"). It operates across sensory channels a meme can travel through. The other party symbols are logos. The घण्टी is a multimedia verb in active voice.

Poets on the frontline

Politics has always been about performance. Murray Edelman wrote decades ago that political actions are symbolic acts: what politicians do matters less than what their actions represent.

Guy-Ernest Debord argued that spectacle replaces lived experience. But the stage has changed. The social media feed is the new stage, and the algorithm is the casting director. It does not select for policy depth, but for recognisability, emotional charge, and remix potential.

Poets have always been at the frontlines of political rupture. The French Revolution had its pamphleteers. The Bolsheviks had Mayakovsky. The Black Panthers had Gil Scott-Heron. Nepal's own political history is full of writers who paid for their words with prison or exile.

Rap is rhythm and poetry. Balen Shah did



not cross from entertainment into politics, his art was always political. "सडकबालक" in 2012 was already a protest song. The diss tracks against corruption were manifestos set to beat.

So, if घण्टी was the sound, Balen was the voice. Supporters rang Bells to perform, projecting their hopes on Balen. One is participatory (anyone can ring it), the other is aspirational (representing what you want the country to become). Together, they form a complete symbolic system: an action and an icon, a thing you do, and a person you believe in.

gn. That is why it worked.

...t paper and become weaponised for generational shame?



side to side, and it rings. Within weeks, crowds of supporters were walking through neighborhoods shaking their phones in unison, producing a wall of digital bell sound.

- The intimate content. A husband-wife vlog filmed inside a car, casually discussing what a lawmaker should actually do. Just two people talking, and it resonated more than any campaign ad.

None of this was centrally coordinated. Parties across Nepal spent money on polished graphics that looked like professional advertisements. RSP supporters spent nothing and made content that felt like conversation. The algorithm doesn't reward production value, it rewards emotional resonance. And nothing resonated more than the feeling that you, personally, could participate in this movement without anyone's permission.

Now what?

The RSP has an overwhelming majority. The Bell rang louder than anyone predicted. But a movement built on open-source energy now has to deliver closed-source results: budgets, legislation, diplomacy, institutional reform.

Balen built his brand by bypassing institutions, Prime Minister Balendra Shah has to run them. He communicated through Facebook posts and rap lyrics. Now he needs to communicate with India, China, and multilateral lenders.

His midnight F-bomb post, deleted within 30 minutes but screenshotted by thousands, showed both his appeal (unfiltered authenticity) and his risk (unfiltered impulsiveness).

ringing bells at dinner, turning family meals into campaign arenas. A bell rings as a prank, then as a joke, then as a political statement. By the third night, it's not funny anymore. It's a conversation.

Lateral: the diaspora pipeline. Nepalis in Australia, the Gulf, Japan, could not vote, but they turned every Viber call home into a campaign touchpoint.

Upward: the bell pressured power itself. No RSP organiser gets a meeting with a UML ward chairman or a NC MP. But those people go home. And at home, they have teenagers, nieces, nephews, and staff whose kids are on TikTok.

A party boss's son rings a bell at dinner and asks uncomfortable questions. An NC donor's daughter shares RSP content on her Instagram story, visible to her father's entire social circle. No political structure, no matter how hierarchical, is sealed off from its own household. The bell did not need to breach the gates of Singha Darbar, it walked in through the kitchen window.

The result crossed every demographic line analysts thought was fixed. Memes didn't just stay in the feed. They colonised the living room, the kitchen, the long-distance phone call, the taxi ride.

Content nobody commissioned

What the RSP's organic content looked less like a political campaign and more like a football fan club. People were not posting because they were told to. They were posting because they belonged.

- Trace the trends as they accumulated: "चुपचाप घण्टीमा छाप" started as a TikTok post, then showed up on motorcycle stickers, WhatsApp statuses, AI-remixed songs, and in tea-shop conversation as a folk proverb.
- Original songs composed by supporters, not the party, gained millions of views. People danced to them at rallies and in the streets. People at polling booths created TikToks to RSP anthems to show their support.
- AI spectacle videos of Balen as a Mahabharat hero, filmy dialogue, stylised Nepal flag. Slapstick clips hitting 200K+ likes and 5M views. All made by random accounts, none traceable to party infrastructure.
- Supporters built Bell apps and websites on their own. One site, ghanti.website, was registered by a random supporter in January. Open it on your phone, shake it



The question is not whether the bell rang loud enough. It obviously did. The question is what happens when the supporters who posted without being asked start expecting results they did not specify. When the meme energy that won living rooms has to translate into parliamentary committees.

For decades, the promise of democracy was that people choose their leaders. What RSP's campaign revealed is something more uncomfortable: in the age of the algorithm and remixable content, people do not just choose their leaders.

They build the campaign, write the slogans, produce the content, convert their own families, and then show up to vote for the movement they made with their own hands. The party becomes a container for energy it didn't create and can't fully control.

That's either the most democratic thing that's ever happened in Nepal, or the most dangerous. It might be both.

Both are algorithm-native. The sunglasses are instantly recognisable in a thumbnail at any size. The bell sound action is identifiable within half a second of a video starting. The confrontational attitude generates the emotional charge that the algorithm rewards.

Balen was already trained in the language of the algorithm: hooks, rhythm, timing, and audience retention. While legacy politicians are just now trying to learn the language of the algorithm, Balen grew up speaking it.

The folk song brand kit



The slogans wrote themselves. "चुपचाप घण्टीमा छाप" spread through tea shops and bus parks like a folk proverb. AI-generated Mahabharat edits positioned Balen Shah as a warrior-hero fighting K P Oli in golden armour.

The entire package, partly by accident, partly by instinct, was built to be remixed. Every element is modular: the bell, the sunglasses, the slogan, the attitude. Take any piece and make your own version.

Like a 'Deusi re' song, the melody is fixed, everyone knows it, but anyone can change the words to fit their occasion and mood. It survives across generations precisely because no one controls it.

The घण्टी ecosystem works the same way. The melody is fixed: the bell, the sound, the slogan, the sunglasses, the attitude. But the lyrics can be anyone's. Shoot it in your neighborhood. Dub it in your language. Film your grandmother's reaction. Set it to your local context. That's why it spread faster than any IT cell could manufacture.

The generational pincer

The standard narrative is that digital movements stay digital, and that memes are a GenZ thing. RSP broke both assumptions. Its content operation executed a pincer movement across generations, capturing not just the youth vote but using youth as a delivery mechanism into households where no party organiser could reach.

The Generational Pincer Flowchart

Three vectors of pressure, all converging on the same target: the living room and the dinner table, where votes in Nepal are actually decided.

Downward: children trolling parents by



Events



Antardrishti

A contemplative solo exhibition of works by Sangee Shrestha, exploring inner vision through paint and ceramic.

Until 11 April, 11am-8pm, The Kala Salon, Chhaya Center, Thamel

Paubha Workshop

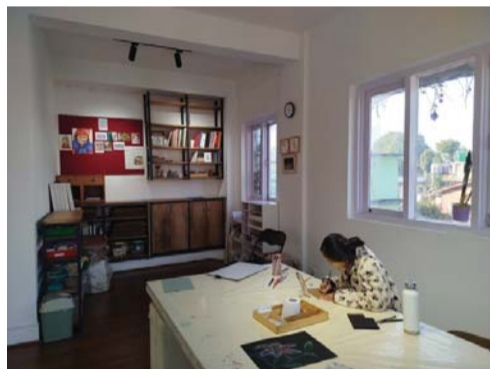
An intermediate workshop on traditional Paubha painting led by artist Udaya Charan Shrestha.

20 March-21 April, 11am onwards, Rs15,000 for 15 classes, Kathmandu Art Gallery, Babar Mahal Revisited

Coffee With A Curator

Roshan Mishra hosts filmmaker and unorthodox editor Tin Dirdamal for a conversation as part of Taragaon Next's Coffee With A Curator series.

18 March, 4pm onwards, Taragaon Next, Boudha



Writing Workshop

A writing workshop with Tsering Tsomo focused on generating ideas and finding ways to start and develop your writing. Register via link in Instagram bio: @drawingroomktm.

14 March, 2pm-5pm, Tickets: Rs2,500, Drawing Room Art Studio, Gyanmandala, 9841954000 / 9849147839

Outdoor Movie Night

Enjoy a screening of Chhichhore under the evening sky, with free popcorn and cold drink included. Register via link in Instagram bio: @rac_himalayangolfers.

14 March 2026, 5:30pm onwards, Tickets: Rs250, Rs350, Firiri Bagan



Vajra Market

Vajra Market – Jazz in the Garden is a plastic-free, pet-friendly market every Saturday. Enjoy a relaxed garden morning with live jazz music, art, and food.

Starts 14 March, 9am-2pm, Hotel Vajra, 9861119954

Dog Show

A national canine event bringing together dog owners and enthusiasts to showcase various breeds under certified judges.

14 March, 9am onwards, Tickets: Rs200-Rs600, Satdobato Swimming Pool, Lalitpur



Music

TRN Fest Sydney

Purna Rai & Dajubhai, Sabin Rai & The Pharaoh, and The Elements come together for a night of Nepali live music in Sydney.

10 April, 7pm onwards (18+), Roundhouse, Sydney



Afterhours Rock

Albatross and Pahelo Batti Muni take the stage for a night of Nepali rock and live performances.

21 March, 7pm onwards, Tickets: Rs999-Rs1299, Club NOVA, Thamel

Radhika Das

Radhika Das performs live in Nepal for the first time, presenting an evening of devotional music and mantras in Patan.

27 March, 5pm onwards, Tickets: Rs3,000-Rs10,000, Patan Museum, Lalitpur



Hami Ek Hau Concert

Bringing iconic hits like 'Timi Nai Hau' and 'Malai Angali Deu', Sabin Rai & The Pharaoh headline this show.

21 March, 12pm onwards, Tickets: Rs1200, Sasa Twa, Kirtipur



Getaway



Heranya Yala

Get a genuine feel of authentic Newari heritage by living right in the middle of Maha Boudha and the Hiranya monastery. The hotel provides a complete tour package to immerse in the rich cultural heritage of Patan.

Gujibahal, Patan, 9745967569

Himalayan Front Hotel

Sarangkot's Himalayan Front Hotel is located atop Sarangkot, overlooking the Annapurna range and Phewa Lake. With luxury rooms, breathtaking sunset views and one of the best restaurants in Pokhara- The Summit Restaurant- it is the ideal place to unwind.

Sarangkot, Pokhara, 9801166370



YMH Kongde

Looking to indulge in a champagne breakfast at 15,000m just a few passes away from the Himalaya? Then book a mountain flight to the Yeti Mountain Home in Kongde right away.

Kongde, Khumbu, 9801249331

Soaltee Westend Premier

Located in the green plains of Nepalgunj, this expansive resort is one of Nepal's more energy efficient and eco-friendly getaways.

Nepalgunj (081) 551145

Village Heritage and Resort

Located at the top of Rara Hill, this humble hotel offers one of the best views of the breathtaking Rara Lake and the spectacular forest of Rara National Park. Ride horses along the lake and go on scenic boat rides that can last as long as a couple hours.

Rara, Mugu, 9802097690



Dining

Anatolia

Anatolia's Indian and Turkish dishes are packed with spices and an unforgettable assortment of flavours. From the Mutton Kofta Curry to the Baklava, the dishes will keep one wanting more. All the food is halal.

Thamel (01) 5358757

Bota Momo

Thinking about enjoying momo on lazy afternoons? Save time and get some from Bota. Bota's open momo and Guccha momo are also available to order.

Kamalpokhari, 9801116402



Chez Caroline

Tucked away from the street noise and fumes, this is the place to visit for authentic French and continental cuisine in Nepal. The restaurant now offers catering and takeaway services too. Try their Profiteroles au Chocolat and Choux pastry filled with vanilla ice cream and hot chocolate sauce.

Babar Mahal Revisited (01) 5363070

Canova Cafe Coffee

This casual cafe not only serves good coffee but also a surprisingly light and flavourful masala dosa.

Maitidevi, 9801023759



Hotel Kaze Darbar

Enjoy Japanese delicacies and more at the boutique hotel. Not to miss is their Grilled Pork in Miso Paste.

Kamalpokhari (01) 4439303

Weekend Weather



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
23° 12°	25° 13°	25° 11°	23° 10°	22° 10°

Washing the Pollution

Kathmandu got some of the worst air quality of the season this past week, and this NASA satellite image of the northern Subcontinent shows why. Prevailing wind from the southwest is sweeping most of the smog from northern India into central Nepal. Overcast skies and lack of wind trapped the pollution along the Himalayan wall. The image also shows a westerly front that will bring rain and thunderstorms that will clear the air somewhat.

Our Pick



If I Had Legs I'd Kick You, written and directed by Mary Bronstein, follows a psychotherapist on a verge of mental breakdown. While trying to manage her own life and career, Linda must cope with her daughter's pediatric feeding disorder, her absent husband, a missing person, and an unusual relationship with her therapist amidst a flooded apartment and chaotic motel situation. Rose Byrne gives a performance of a lifetime as Linda in this 2025 drama also starring Conan O'Brien, Danielle Macdonald, Christian Slater and ASAP Rocky.

सामाजिक सञ्जाल प्रयोगमा सचेतता अपनाऔं

- सामाजिक सञ्जालमा अपरिचित व्यक्तिको साथी बन्ने अनुरोधलाई विश्वस्त भएर मात्र प्रतिक्रिया जनाऔं ।
- अपरिचित व्यक्तिलाई जथाभावी साथी बन्न अनुरोध नपठाऔं ।
- सामाजिक सञ्जाल तथा अन्य विद्युतीय माध्यमबाट चिड्डा पुरस्कार जस्ता आर्थिक प्रलोभनका प्रस्तावको भरमा नपरौं ।
- आफूले प्रवाह गरेका सन्देश वा सूचनाबाट समाजमा पर्नसक्ने नकारात्मक प्रभावको ख्याल गरौं ।
- आफ्नो सन्देशले कुनै व्यक्ति वा अन्य कुनै समुदायको आत्मसम्मानमा चोट नपुऱ्याऔं ।



नेपाल सरकार
विज्ञापन बोर्ड



SOCIAL MEDIA



PUKAR BAM / FACEBOOK



BIRAJ BHAKTA SHRESTHA / FACEBOOK

UNCOMMON SENSE: Bibeksheel Nepali founder Ujwal Thapa with Ranju Darshana (now Neupane and elected from Kathmandu-1) at a public event in 2018 (left). With Pukar Bam at Thapa's home in 2016 (middle) and Biraj Bhakta Shrestha at a protest against the Guthi Bill in 2019 (right). Bam and Shrestha were elected last week from Kathmandu-4 and Kathmandu-8 respectively.

RSP's activist DNA

New governing party's reform agenda is a legacy of Bibeksheel Nepali founder Ujwal Thapa

Shristi Karki

“Let's have another cup of tea,” Ujwal Thapa of the Alternative Bibeksheel Nepali party told the young activist Pukar Bam ten years ago. The two had 12 cups of tea that day, discussing ways to get Nepal out of its political deadend.

Thapa contested the Constituent Assembly election in 2013 as an independent from Kathmandu, and formed Bibeksheel Nepali to galvanise youth impatient for change, fielding candidates in the first federal election in 2017.

Ujwal Thapa was a political guru who was way ahead of his time, and his protégés were among the RSP's winning candidates in last week's election.



SOCIAL MEDIA

Pukar Bam was a core member of Bibeksheel Nepali until its dissolution, and won the Kathmandu-4 seat this time. Other former Bibeksheel leaders who won the election from the RSP in Kathmandu include Ranju Neupane from Kathmandu-1, Sasmit Pokharel from Kathmandu-5, and Biraj Bhakta Shrestha in Kathmandu-8.

As votes were counted and the results from Kathmandu began to come in, the candidates paid fulsome tribute to Ujwal Thapa's mentorship and in inspiring idealistic youth to become a part of an alternative political force.

Today, as RSP members of Parliament, they are no longer an alternative, but a part of Nepal's new mainstream politics.

Thapa returned to Nepal after finishing his undergraduate computer science degree in the US at the peak of the Maoist insurgency. His foray into politics began when he traveled to Nepal's western mountains to train communities in mediation.

After the war, he started a computer design company for young entrepreneurs entering the workforce. But he became frustrated with the inability of

the second Constituent Assembly to promulgate the Constitution, and the power struggle between political parties played out in the streets that led to frequent shutdowns paralysing the country.

PROTEST TO POLITICS

Ujwal Thapa had had enough, and rallied people from across walks of life, leading peaceful, silent demonstrations proclaiming ‘नेपाल खुल्ला छ’ against prolonged, violent strikes. Citizens fed up with the main political parties organised to defy the shutdowns.

Thapa's activism and vision for a new Nepal drew disenchanted and previously apathetic youth into politics and to join the Bibeksheel Sajha Party in 2013.

Thapa was the pioneer of alternative politics in Nepal, and was leading a youth force long before the GenZ became synonymous with Nepal's September Storm. He mentored and guided social activists who are today influential youth leaders engaged in non-traditional politics.

“Ujwal Thapa, with his entrepreneurial spirit, wanted to address people's pain-points, and believed that activism was the starting point to alternative politics,” explains Ashutosh Tivari, former member of Bibeksheel Sajha party. “He sought to build confidence, motivate, and build a community for young people, which drew a lot of people into Bibeksheel.”

He adds: “And while people might say that Bibeksheel never got big, that was never its point. Its function was to be an early talent incubator, which is what it did as evident by the result of this election”

Thapa died in 2021 of complications related to Covid-19, and Bibeksheel had two mergers with Rabinendra Mishra's Sajha Party before being permanently dissolved in 2021.

But many of its idealistic members joined Rabi Lamichhane's RSP, formed just four months before the 2022 federal election. Such was the groundswell of support for change that the RSP became the fourth-largest in Parliament.

In 2017, Ranju Neupane (then Ranju Darshana) was the youngest mayoral candidate for Kathmandu at age 21, and contested the federal election in 2022. Pukar Bam himself lost the 2022 election in

Kathmandu-1 as an independent.

Sashmit Pokharel also ran an unsuccessful campaign as an independent candidate in Kathmandu during the 2022 provincial election. Later, he was a member of the City Planning Commission under Balendra Shah when he was elected mayor of Kathmandu in 2022.

Last week, the RSP swept the election with a supermajority of 182 seats in Parliament. Voters placed their trust in the party and its leaders to steer Nepal in a new direction after the youth unrest in September.

In many ways, Nepal's youth have decided, just as Ujwal Thapa

once did, that enough is enough with corruption, malgovernance, nepotism and dynastic politics.

In the documentary about his life, Dimag Ghochne Manche, released earlier this year, some RSP nominees who previously worked with and were mentored by Thapa spoke of the impact he had on their lives, career, and activism.

Among them is Biraj Bhakta Shrestha, former minister of Youth and Sports who is now a second time RSP parliamentarian. “I tell everybody that if it hadn't been for Ujwal Dai, I would not have gotten into politics,” he says in the film.

It would be unfair to attribute

all the success of the hard-fought campaigns entirely to Ujwal Thapa's protégés and former coworkers.

But his ethos and vision for Nepal was what inspired them, and will in the coming years be reflected in national politics through the young idealists he mentored.

Says Ashutosh Tiwari: “There are many Bibeksheels outside of RSP in constant and open communication with their old friends who have been elected. They will be keeping the lawmakers in check so that they do not stray too far from the values that they grew up with.”

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Motherhood in the Madhes

Chance for Nepal's new government to fulfil its campaign promise to improve healthcare access

- High Court employee Amrita KC fulfilled her duties as a polling officer in Nepalganj on election day, with her six-month-old daughter held in her arms.
- The same morning in Kathmandu-1, RSP candidate Ranju Neupane appeared at the polling station to cast her vote with her 10-day-old baby. The next day, she became the first candidate declared a winner by the Election Commission.

Her party won a supermajority and will now be tasked with reforms in governance, development, the economy, and service delivery. At least four of the winning RSP candidates are doctors, and the party must fulfil its campaign promise of improving healthcare and further reducing Nepal's maternal mortality rate.

Shristi Karki in Rautahat

The lowest-ranking region for healthcare indicators in Nepal is Madhes Province.

Across the districts of Madhes and Karnali, where maternal and neonatal health outcomes remain poorer than in the rest of the nation, local governments in collaboration with non-profits, have financed and facilitated the operation of birthing centres where nurses are lifelines for pregnant women, new mothers, and newborn babies.

At the Inarwari birthing centre in Rautahat district, nurse midwife Manisha Kushwaha gently applies ultrasound gel on the abdomen of 28-year-old Robina Khatun who is having a sonogram in the first trimester.

Kushwaha glides the transducer over Khatun's belly before

pronouncing her baby healthy. She will later send the ultrasound machine for the municipality's monthly mobile sonogram program in a neighbouring village.

Ministry of Health and Population guidelines recommend that pregnant women make eight antenatal care (ANC) visits to health posts before their delivery date. Expecting mothers are also provided Rs800 for the eight visits and travel costs according to geographical region.

In Baudhimai, the local government provides more incentives: 10 eggs for non-vegetarian and protein powder for vegetarian mothers-to-be per visit. The municipality also provides free ambulance service for pregnant women, and conducts a monthly mobile sonogram program across all communities.

The initiatives of local governments, health officials, non-profits, and volunteers have meant that institutional deliveries here have increased drastically. In Rautahat, institutional deliveries have increased from 50% to 68% in four years, according to figures from US-based non-profit One Heart Worldwide.

"Home deliveries have completely stopped in Inarwari, and women are increasingly accessing ante-natal and post-natal care, as well as family planning measures," says Manisha Kushwaha. "Women and families here are now more aware of maternal and neonatal healthcare."

One of them is Noor Jahan Khatun, who had her first baby at home and gave birth to her second child at the local birthing centre despite wanting another home birth. When the due date for her third child came around, she walked to the health post herself.

"I realised it is much better to give birth at the hospital," Noor, who is pregnant with her



fourth child, told us. "They have everything we need in case of complications."

The nursing staff at the birthing centre, as well as other centres in the municipality also periodically review their training in the birthing simulation room set up on the premises of the Inarwari birthing centre so that they retain their training and continue to hone their skills.

Over in Sarlahi's Sundarpur in Chakraghatta Rural Municipality, a state-of-the-art birthing centre now stands adjacent to the derelict old structure from which nurses previously had to provide services to pregnant women and new mothers.

The new and improved maternity ward was built last year with Rs2.4 million from the municipality and a Rs2 million from One Heart Worldwide under a cost-sharing public-private partnership formula.

Chief nurse Sunita Rai has been stationed here for the last six years, and looks at the old building. "I remember when we had to deliver babies while ankle-deep in flood water during monsoon," recalls Rai. "This new facility and the equipment have improved service."

Since the start of the fiscal year, the six-nurse team at Sundarpur has delivered more than 140 babies. One day last month, a national holiday, the centre was quieter than usual, with just two women waiting for delivery.

But fewer-than-usual patients does not mean there is no work to be done. In the afternoon, nurses make the rounds of the community to conduct post-natal care visits, and to keep track of how the new mothers and babies in the village are doing. This is important because neonatal mortality of babies within the first month of birth is still high.

"For the people in this village we are both the doctor and the nurse," Rai says matter-of-factly as she walks towards the village to see a new mother.

In Sarlahi's Laxmipur Kodraha, Kanchan Rai makes her own rounds, calling out to several young children playing in the pale afternoon sun. Rai has been stationed in Laxmipur for 10 years and delivered most of those children playing outside herself.

A beloved member of the community, Rai is greeted by several women and invited in for tea and snacks as she walks by.

The Laxmipur birthing centre has seen major renovations to make it more spacious, better equipped, and hygienic. Mothers now have more privacy, especially from men who in the past would simply barge in wanting to know which woman from the village was about to give birth.

"We deliver 400 babies on average every year," Rai says. "There have been zero home births in this village for the last five years, and women are increasingly accessing maternal healthcare and family planning services."

Institutional deliveries in Sarlahi have gone up from 37% to 71% over the past five years.

Pregnant women who require C-sections, or those who experience complications during pregnancies, are referred to the nearest provincial hospitals in Gaur or Malangwa.

"Community-based awareness programs about going for hospital visits have helped reduce home deliveries, and counselling sessions provided to new mothers at provincial hospitals have contributed to better maternal and neonatal health outcomes," says Sachin Yadav, obstetrician-gynaecologist at Malangwa Provincial Hospital.

Tackling patriarchy

Nepal has made dramatic progress in reducing the maternal mortality rate (MMR) from 539 per 100,000 births to 142 over the past 30 years. But that is the national average. In parts of Nepal like Madhes, Karnali, and Lumbini Province, MMR is still high.

One reason is that despite birthing centres and awareness of pre- and post-natal healthcare, socio-cultural norms in a predominantly patriarchal society also mean that female literacy remains low, and the rate of underage marriage is high.

Rautahat has the lowest literacy rate in Nepal, and the lowest female literacy rate. This has a direct correlation with its its fertility and maternal mortality rates. Gaur Hospital continues to

see maternal and intrauterine fetal death (IUFD) deaths due to a lack of ANC visits by patients.

In the absence of education and information, socio-cultural misconceptions still persist. Women refuse to take essential pre-natal medication like folic acid because they think it will affect their babies' complexion, and do not eat enough fruits because they believe it will cause fetal pneumonia.

Women are also expected to get through their pregnancies without going for health check ups in keeping with the tradition of their mothers and mothers-in-law enduring pregnancy and childbirth at home without access to healthcare.

Maternal and neonatal health outcomes are also affected by child

marriage, as well as the patriarchy-enforced preference of a male child in the family.

At Gaur Provincial Hospital, 25-year-old Asha Kumari stands with her hands braced against the hospital bed as she is gripped by a contraction. Her eldest child is already 12, and she is at the hospital to have her fifth baby.

"She had already had two children by the time she was 18," explains her mother, who is here with Asha's mother-in-law.

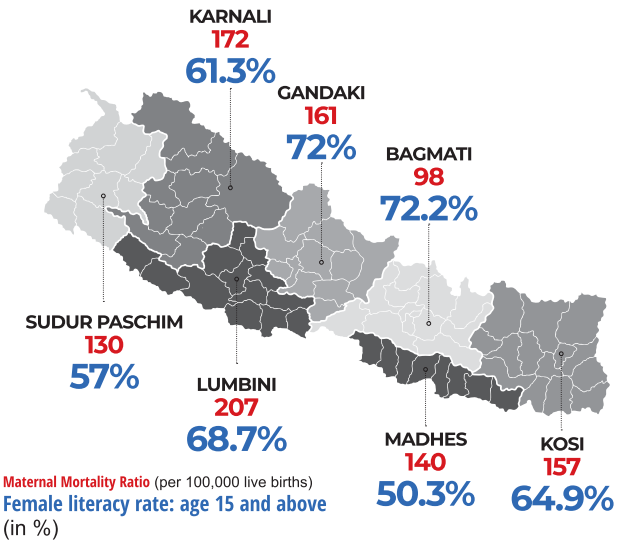
Officials worry that reporting instances of child marriage might mean that women no longer trust health workers and hospitals, and stop accessing healthcare altogether. They insist that investment in maternal health needs to be accompanied by socio-cultural interventions.



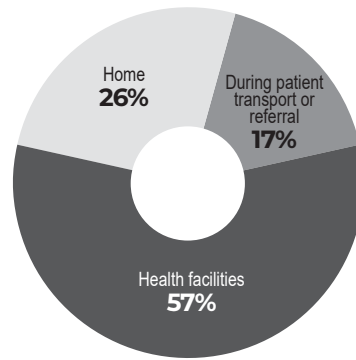


PHOTOS: KIRAN PANDAY / ONE HEART WORLDWIDE

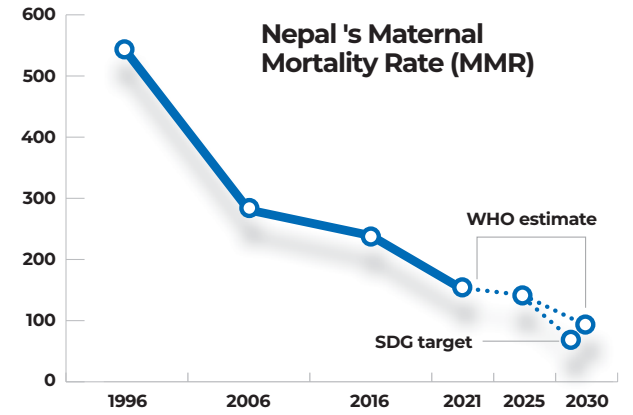
Maternal Mortality and Female Literacy Rate by Province in 2021



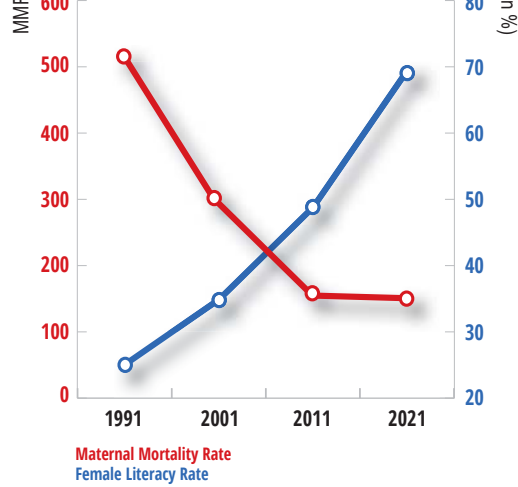
Maternal Mortality by Place of Death



SOURCES: NEPAL CENSUSES AND NEPAL LIVING STANDARD SURVEYS



Maternal Mortality and Female Literacy in Nepal



due to birth asphyxia and dehydration.

"I have not even been able to think of a name for him," says the 25-year-old. "My other two children were born normal but I worry for this one."

This is where the election pledge of the RSP will be tested. Will the new government cut through the bureaucracy, corruption and resource constraints to provide life-saving services to mothers and babies in places like Rautahat and Sarlahi?

There has been no maternal mortality at the Malangwa Provincial Hospital for the last two years, but the hospital has had neonatal deaths.

"We need more spacious waiting areas and training for maternal and neonatal healthcare workers," says Sachin Yadav. "Without that we are unable to serve our patients and have to send them to Kathmandu or Birganj."

In Baudhimai village, patient numbers have increased by 140% in the last three years, but the federal government slashed the health budget by 60%. The government across three levels is supposed to provide 98 types of essential medicine free of cost at primary healthcare centres, but the federal and provincial governments often fail to make their share of the drugs available.

"Federal and especially provincial governments have been irresponsible when it comes to investing in local healthcare," says Baudhimai mayor Pradeep Kumar Yadav. Health workers and institutions continue to work without being paid or funded when the budget remains frozen for months at a time. "It does not matter to a patient when the fiscal year begins," says Sachin Yadav at the Malangwa Provincial Hospital. "Maternal deaths do not wait for the budget to be released."

And despite budget constraints, political posturing still continues. At local levels, officials build

multiple birthing centres in each ward when one would suffice, and these buildings remain empty.

Politics also plays a significant role in whether or not local officials are willing to agree when health officials try to refer pregnant women with complications to better-equipped facilities.

And while services have improved due to the efforts of dedicated healthcare officials, they are transferred from one place to another at the whim of governments that come and go, which means staff turnover in these institutions is very high, affecting consistent service delivery.

Yadav has been at Malangwa for three years— during which yearly institutional deliveries have gone from 2,000 to 3,200 and C-section births have gone from 150 to 700. He had just begun to hit his stride at the hospital when he received transfer letters to another hospital.

So far, he has managed to hold on to his position in Malangwa, but he does not know how long he will be able to delay the transfer. 🇳🇵

SAFE MOTHERHOOD

Newborns with birth asphyxia, tachycardia, meconium aspiration syndrome and other complications are admitted to the special newborn care unit at the Gaur Provincial Hospital. But Apsana Khatun, chief nurse at the hospital's maternal and neonatal unit says: "We have not been able to provide neo-natal care

as effectively because we do not have an NICU." Provincial hospitals provide life-saving services, but remain underfunded and in need of life-saving equipment.

At the Gaur Hospital, Rukmini Kumari Shah gently rocks her three-day-old son, who was admitted to the special newborn care unit

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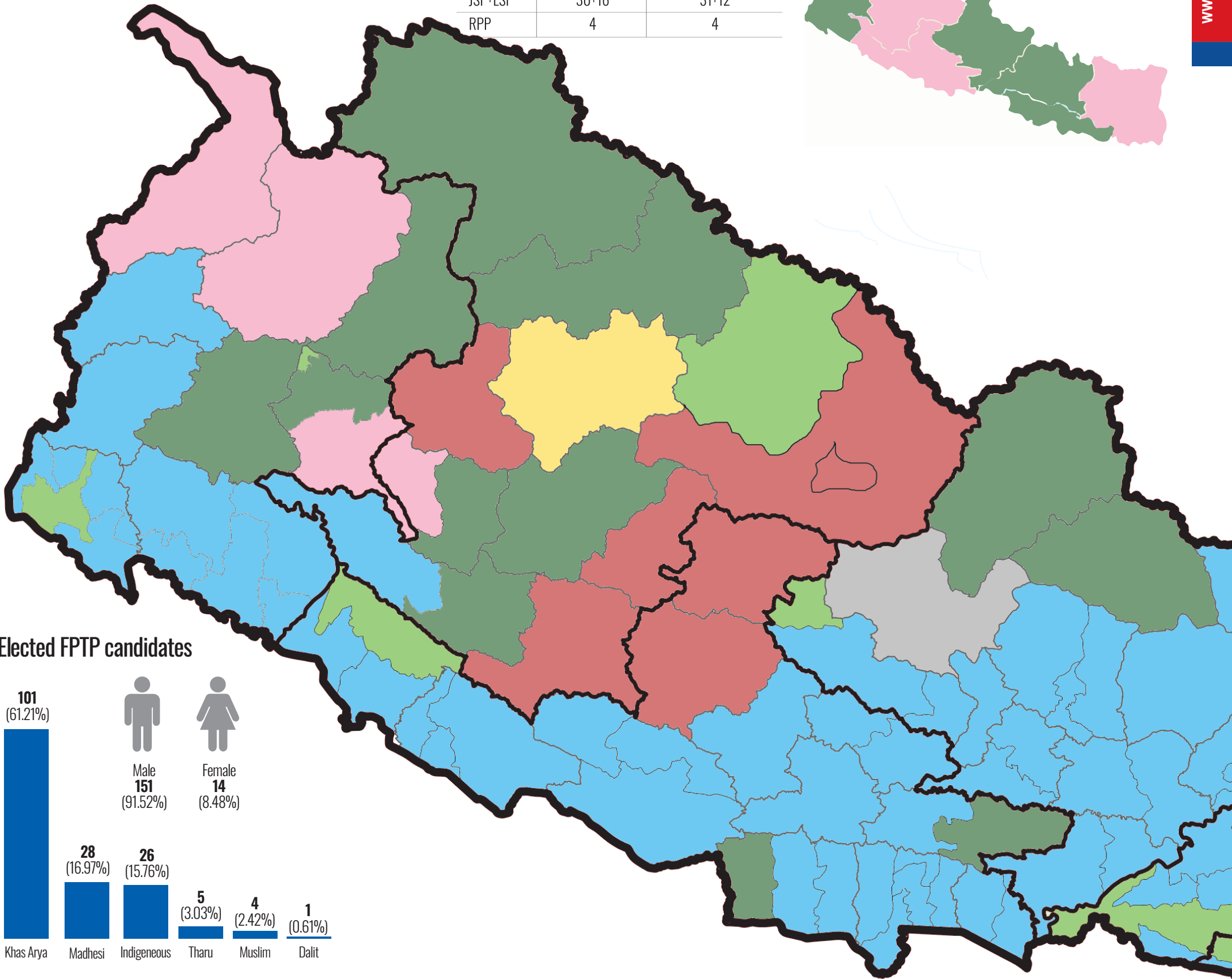
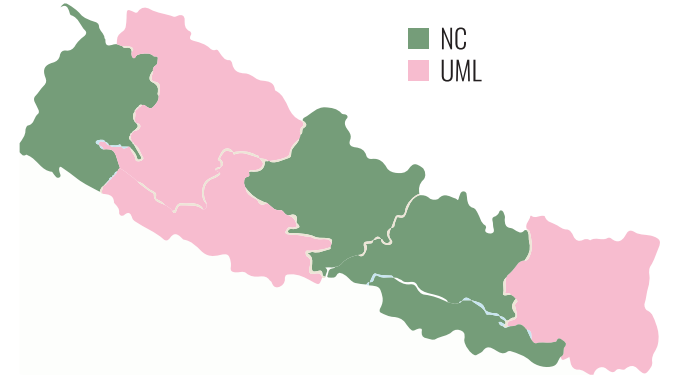
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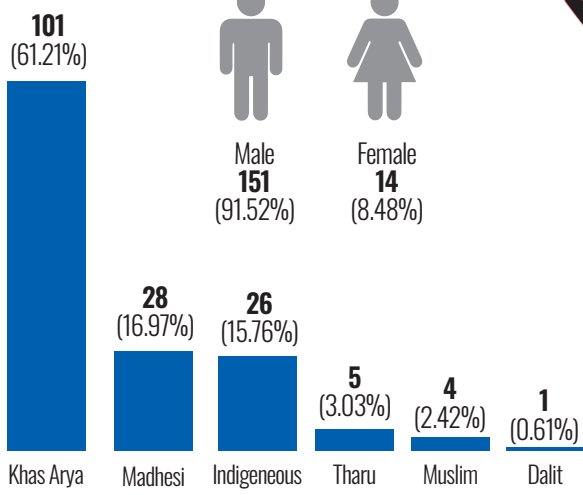
Heads of local governments by parties

Parties	Mayor/Chair	Deputy mayor/chair
NC	329	300
UML	206	241
NCP	141	151
JSP+LSP	30+16	31+12
RPP	4	4

Province governments by parties



Elected FPTP candidates



ANUP TAMU