and Indian armies, as a stop-gap arrangement in lieu of international monitors, arms management is unlikely to be formalized without the arrival of the full UN team. Under the circumstances, constituent assembly elections by the slated date -- June 2007 -- seem highly unlikely.

Since it is physically impossible to conduct polls during the monsoon months (July-September) and the festive season thereafter, elections may not be held by the end of this year. The uncertainty has given rise to a fear: will constituent assembly elections be held at all? The people of Nepal have been promised a constitution of their own making, a right which they had been denied the in the 1950s. The scepticism this time is fueled by the frustration of a once bitten, twice shy electorate.

The prospect of lasting peace hinges on timely, free and fair elections for the constituent assembly. The process can begin to unravel at the slightest hint of insincerity, either on the part of the government or on the part of the Maoists. Perhaps that is the reason for the the dramatic improvements on the ground, since the April uprising that clipped the wings of the king, forced the Maoists into the mainstream and coaxed the parliamentary parties into adopting progressive agendas.

The Rhododendron Revolution is still incomplete; and like all unfinished political upheavals in history, a fresh upsurge will be highly destabilizing.

Past imperfect

The "unification" of the Kingdom of Nepal was initiated by King Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha, a small and impoverished principality west of Kathmandu, in 1715, through an astounding mix of treachery (he made friends with the Malla rulers of Bhaktapur with the express purpose of annexing it), cruelty (he had every male member of Makwanpur's Sen dynasty, his in-laws by marriage, put to sword so that none could challenge his authority later), deception (he successfully mobilized Hindu ascetics as informers and advance party during his conquests), intellect (he attacked Kathmandu when its fighters were celebrating their annual Indrajatra festival by getting drunk in the traditional way), and bravery (Kirtipur tested his mettle, but he repeatedly attacked without being disappointed). By the standards of his time, Prithvi Narayan Shah was indeed a great king in South Asia.

The expansionist policies of King Prithvi Narayan Shah were given continuity by his descendents and their courtiers in Kathmandu. People, however, never figured in the royal scheme of things. For royal adventures in the south, east, and west, the court of Kathmandu relied on the services of ambitious mercenaries willing to take up the khukuri -- the famed curved knife of Gorkhalis -- in the hope of being rewarded with land grants in annexed territories. Expansionist policies of the Kathmandu court were halted in the north by the Chinese in Tibet, in 1792. The extension of the Gorkha Empire came to an end when it was roundly defeated in the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814-16, and was forced to sign the humiliating Treaty of Sugauli.

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Frustrated by the confinement imposed upon it by the unequal treaty, the Gorkhali war machine turned upon itself as one court intrigue after another consumed statesman Bhimsen Thapa, warrior Mathber Singh Thapa, and administrator Fatte Jung Chautaria. Jung Bahadur Kunwar, the foxiest and cruelest of all the courtiers of the time, emerged the de facto ruler of the kingdom in the wake of the Kot Massacre that practically eliminated the entire nobility of the Kathmandu Valley in one fell swoop in 1846. Nepal's final boundary came to be determined by the return of Naya Muluk (Banke, Bardia, Kailali, and Kanchanpur districts in western part of the country) to premier Jung Bahadur for the services that he had rendered by helping the English crush the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 in Awadh.

Jung consolidated his hold over the kingdom by marrying his progenies into the family of the reigning monarch. He dispensed with his Kunwar surname and conferred the title of Rana upon himself. Hagiographers of the day manufactured history to connect his ancestry to the House of Mewar on the fringes of the Thar Desert. After Jung, the transfer of power from one Rana to another was invariably through either a coup or a court intrigue. For 104 years, the Shahs reigned while the Ranas ruled, and the power never extended beyond the close family of these close cousins. A few Mewar nobles and some Brahmin priests did benefit from the crumbs off the royal tables, but that only helped in deflecting attention away from the ruling families. The competition among the aspiring elite was confined to an unhealthy rivalry for court patronage.

Such an attitude among the privileged middle-class of Kathmandu undermined the achievements of the "revolution" of 1950 when an India-mediated compromise restored King Tribhuvan to power in Kathmandu, and the Ranas were rehabilitated in national