

Navigating pre-election tensions: A plea for common sense



LETTERS FROM THE UK

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With the frequently stated, and apparently unequivocal, commitment to a general election in early February 2026 in Bangladesh, the starting pistol has been fired for about six months of intense party campaigning that will no doubt include disputes over the rules of the game. One central battleground will be party manifestos—which, in recent UK elections, have become more important than before as accountability documents. The ruling Labour Party in the UK is currently trapped by imprudent manifesto commitments, especially on tax, made before the July 2024 election in order to win it.

The question is, will the manifestos of Bangladesh's political parties emerge as serious accountability documents, especially with so many parties competing, each trying to showcase its unique selling point? In the past, manifestos of some parties referenced their role in the Liberation War and nation-building struggles during the 1970s. Will that be the point of contestation this time too, or will parties shift their focus to the urgent challenges of addressing livelihood concerns and national aspirations, delivering concrete ideas about delivery? Of course, the memory of what happened over 50 years ago is baked into the nation's DNA, but the older generation need to accept that today's youth prioritise the future over the past. I was reminded of this by younger Bangladeshi colleagues over the years.

So, will this be the “moving on” election? If so, we should be seeing “moving on” manifestos, too. The trend of settling old scores about “who did what” decades ago should be seen as a distraction from the huge challenges facing any incoming government. After July 2024, I advocated for some version of a truth and reconciliation commission. Perhaps it is time to allow this to happen by default. I am not suggesting that clear cases of violence, abuse, and murder should be ignored. Definitely not. But there is a difference between pursuing political feuds

and vengeance, and genuinely seeking rights and justice. Justice in the future will never be realised if the courts are overwhelmed, as they presently are, by spurious cases.

If the authors of such cases were genuinely concerned about people's livelihoods and aspirations, then they would draw a common-sense line and re-focus. The nation desperately needs to come together to face the future, rather than being trapped in the pursuit of short-term victories over opponents with whom they have, frankly, more in common than not. This is a plea for replacing factional intrigue with real, value-based thinking about what Bangladeshis need for a fulfilled future.

Take, for example, the finding of a recent study by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) that the national poverty stands at nearly 28 percent, with extreme poverty rising to 9.35 percent. One may dispute whether this is an actual rise or whether previous figures were over-optimistic (I tend to the latter view), but the PPRC figures must be seen as a jolt to our senses about inclusive development. We have long known that inequality has grown at a higher rate in Bangladesh than in any other Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICS) seeking exit from LDC status. These new poverty figures show that over a quarter of the population is being left behind, while a minority become super-rich by buying state favours and political leverage.

If a political party seeks legitimacy and credibility in the upcoming elections and afterwards, then it must confront the staggering reality that neither foreign aid nor economic growth (from a low base) has prevented the dangerous divergence between the rich and the poor over the last five decades. Of course, the population has simultaneously grown and much poverty has been alleviated, but we cannot rest on laurels. “Keeping up” is clearly not happening.

Manifestos should, therefore, be published

well before election day, following a deadline set for all contenders by the Election Commission, with non-compliance resulting in exclusion from the contest. This way, manifestos become available for public debate and scrutiny. Parties, in their own interest, should make efforts to discuss and communicate their programmes widely, not simply rely on vote banks and manipulation, as has too often been the case across the 13

power, they should accept that national elections confer one set of powers, but other levels—upazila and union, for instance—also allocate authority, including to rival parties. That is pluralist democracy with checks and balances. We have seen what happens when full inclusion equals full exclusion in Bangladesh and elsewhere. That path easily leads to dictatorship; and students and ordinary citizens in July last year fought

short-term factionalism. It is a little like the *prisoner's dilemma* where mutual distrust ensures that everyone ends up in a situation no one actually wants.

So if the nation seeks responsible governance to address the major challenges—whether related to inflation, banking, gender and minority discrimination, poverty, skill shortages, climate change, global competitiveness, river pollution,



Politics must catch up with the demand of the July uprising where people fought to dismantle an authoritarian order and lay the foundations for a more accountable, participatory future.

FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Beyond the flames: Nepal's search for a sovereign path



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The Himalayas have always been a place of profound silence and deep truths. But in the autumn of 2025, that silence is shattered by the roar of a generation that could wait no longer. The images from Kathmandu are both electrifying and heartbreaking: a sea of young, determined faces illuminated by the flicker of a state's failing legitimacy. The resignation of Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli was a seismic event, a testament to the power of the people's will.

Yet, as the smoke clears over Singha Durbar, a crucial question emerges for Nepal and for all watching nations in the Global South: in a world of competing giants, can the righteous anger of a people be channelled into building a truly sovereign future, or does it risk being steered by other designs? The test for Nepal is not just to voice its rage, but to own its revolution.

To dismiss Nepal's unrest as a foreign concoction is to insult the intelligence and the agony of its youth. The fuel for this

fire was laid down over years of profound neglect. Nepal's economy has become a cruel paradox: it is a factory that does not produce goods, but exiles. The issuance of over 839,266 exit permits in the last fiscal year further highlights the national crisis. This relentless exodus of its brightest and strongest, propping up a remittance economy that constitutes over 33 percent of GDP, is an admission of a state's failure to provide for its citizens. When a government's primary export is its own people, what remains is a powder keg of disillusionment, with youth unemployment acting as the fuse.

The state's decision to ban social media was not merely a misstep; it was an act of digital suffocation. For a generation that lives, works, and dreams online, this was the final, unforgivable severance. Their protest was organic, a raw, legitimate cry for a future that doesn't require a passport to be lived.

But righteous anger has a dangerous twin: orchestrated chaos. The evolution of

the protests from mass dissent to systematic destruction follows a pattern that raises difficult questions. For instance, the burning of the Birgunj Customs Office, a vital economic artery, was not a mere act of passionate protest. It was a surgical strike on institutional state capacity.

The most alarming event was the assault on Dillibazar Jail. The escape of an estimated 15,000 inmates is not the work of enraged students; it is a tactical operation that demands planning, resources, and a specific intent to unleash anarchy and paralyse the state. This is the moment the script may have flipped—when a homegrown movement becomes a fertile ground for those who specialise in turning chaos into strategic advantage.

Why would external powers care about the fate of a small, landlocked nation? The answer lies in geography and the relentless logic of power. Nepal, perched between India and China, is the ultimate buffer state. For decades, it has navigated a delicate dance between its two colossal neighbours. But one project promises to shatter this balance: the China-Nepal trans-Himalayan railway.

This is not just a train line. As former Chinese envoys have stated, it is a “game-changer,” designed to transform Nepal from a landlocked nation into a “land-linked” hub, integrated directly into China's Belt and Road Initiative. It represents nothing less than a fundamental reorientation of Nepal's

economic and strategic destiny away from its historical dependencies. For any power invested in containing the rise of a multipolar Asia and maintaining its own primacy, this is an unacceptable prospect. A stable, confident Nepal building this railway is one thing; a Nepal in flames, its government toppled and its future uncertain, is quite another.

This is where the documented actions of external actors demand scrutiny, not as proof of conspiracy, but as a map of undeniable interest. The United States has a long and sophisticated history of influencing political transitions under the banner of “democracy promotion.” The National Endowment for Democracy (NED), with its deep congressional funding and historical ties to intelligence agendas, has been a vehicle for this influence globally. The fact that several Nepali youth groups and NGOs at the forefront of the unrest have received NED funding is a data point that cannot be ignored.

The diplomatic choreography is equally telling. The 2023 Nepal visit of Victoria Nuland, a diplomat synonymous with hawkish interventionism in Ukraine and elsewhere, was a significant signal. The highly publicised meeting between the popular, anti-establishment Kathmandu Mayor, Balen Shah, and US Ambassador Dean Thompson was another. In the subtle language of geopolitics, these are not casual chats. They are alignments. They are efforts to co-opt the energy of dissent and channel it towards

outcomes that serve a larger, offshore strategy.

The question for the Global South is not whether Nepali youth have a right to be angry. They do. The question is whether their authentic cry for justice is being amplified and weaponised to ensure the Himalayan railway never leaves the drawing board, to keep Nepal in a state of manageable instability, and to ensure the great game of control continues, just with new, digitally-native pawns.

Nepal's story is our story. It is a cautionary tale for Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and every nation navigating the treacherous waters of 21st-century geopolitics. It teaches us that our domestic failures—our corruption, our inequality—are our greatest vulnerabilities, the open windows through which foreign influence flies in.

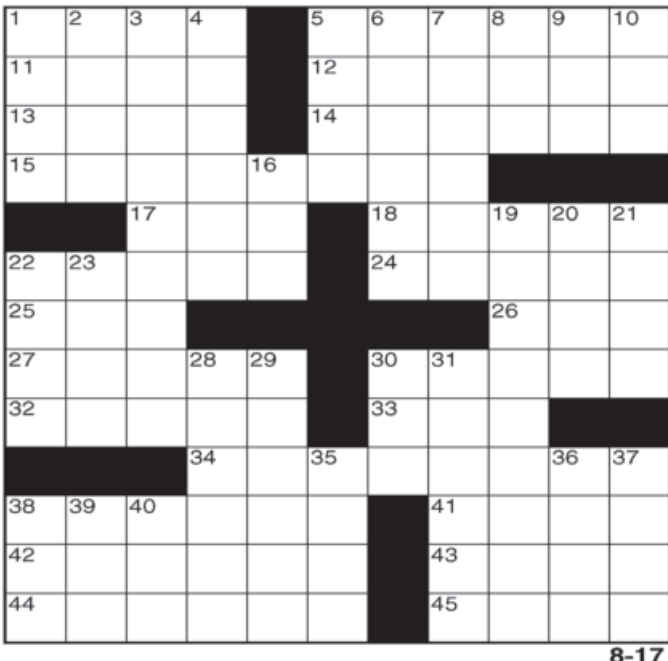
The path forward for Nepal, and for all of us, is not to reject the valid demands of the young. It is to build nations so resilient, so just, and so confident in their own sovereignty that they become immune to the whispered scripts of external actors. The dream of a peaceful, prosperous, and interconnected South Asia depends on it. The Himalayas have witnessed empires rise and fall. The hope now is that they will witness the rise of a Nepal that is not a trophy in a new Cold War, but a sovereign author of its own destiny, its future written in the hopeful, determined eyes of its youth, finally building at home.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Cats' quarries
5 Crafty
11 Fan favorite
12 Trail mix bit
13 Dispatch
14 Flashing light
15 Pretty sure things
17 Purpose
18 Like a corset
22 Treat the turkey
24 Skip the ceremony
25 Bulldog backer
26 Originally called
27 Mythical weeper
30 Soda bottle size
32 TV's Leary
33 Outback bird

- 34 Lunar events
38 Goof
41 Verdi opera
42 Pony Express workers
43 Beef cut
44 Tips off
45 Poker payment
- DOWN**
1 Overlook
2 Inking
3 Puzzlement
4 Heir, often
5 Church area
6 End a lawsuit
7 Ankle bone
8 First noemero
9 Soaking spot

- 10 Seine summer
16 Flower visitor
19 Bruise
20 Olympics weapon
21 Glade grazer
22 Crook
23 "I cannot tell -"
28 Singer Justin
29 Chaperone
30 Oahu garland
31 Gazelle's kin
35 Defeat
36 Fix a story
37 Rational
38 Lingerie buy
39 Gusher flow
40 Pindar poem



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