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WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

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Nepalgunj Jomsom



A foreign visitor poses with a giant bell as her friend takes a picture at Bhaktapur Durbar Square on Monday. The brass statue atop the granite column is King Bhupatindra Malla, who ruled over Bhaktapur in the 18th century.

POST PHOTO: ANISH REGMI

Despite law, Nepal fails to achieve Dalit women representation in wards

Parties say they failed to find candidates, an argument Dalit activists do not agree with.



POST ILLUSTRATION

This time, as many as 123 seats in local units meant for Dalit women will remain vacant as parties say they could not find candidates.

TIKA R PRADHAN
KATHMANDU, MAY 9

When Prabha Pariyar was approached with a proposition to run for ward member, she had little idea about it.

"I spoke with some senior members in the community. Then some CPN-UML leaders also reached out to me," said Prabha, 43. "Then I thought the position could be a platform for me to raise the issues of our community."

She was fielded as a member of Ward 27 of Kathmandu Metropolitan City. Since no candidacy was filed

against her, she won the position unopposed long before the elections.

"I have now also taken the party membership," said Prabha, who used to work for a non-governmental organisation.

Nepal is holding local elections on May 13. The Local Level Election Act-2017 has made it mandatory that of the five persons elected in each ward, one must be a Dalit woman. That means, 6,743 Dalit women representatives must be elected in 753 local units across the country. Prabha is one of those.

Despite the law, however, only 6,620 Dalit women will be elected as ward members from the upcoming elections, as there are no candidates for 123 wards. The legally-mandated number could not be achieved in the last local elections held in 2017 either. As many as 176 seats reserved for Dalit women as ward members remained vacant.

Political parties have resorted to the excuse that they could not find Dalit women candidates.

Dalit rights activists, however, say there are multiple factors—from discriminatory mindset among leaders to political parties' lack of willingness—which have become barriers to electing Dalit ward members in the legally mandated number.

According to Pradip Pariyar, a Dalit rights activist, patriarchal mindset prevalent among political party leaders and their discriminatory approach continue to pose an obstruction in Dalit women's progress.

"Instead of implementing the constitutional provision of inclusion they [political leaders] have the mindset to seek loopholes so that they could cut down the seats of the underprivileged communities," said Pradip. "They seem to be least bothered to implement the constitution that they drafted."

The Pariyar-led Samata Foundation had organised province-wise campaigns before nominations were filed for the local polls.

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For people with disabilities, there are barriers galore to right to voting

Secrecy, lack of ballot papers with tactile relief, and tall tables are key infrastructural issues.

AAKASH CHAUDHARY
KATHMANDU, MAY 9

Phanindra Poudel of Pokhara has been hearing about the local elections but he is not keen on going to the polling booth to vote. He has bitter experiences from the past.

"As a blind person, the voting process is quite cumbersome for me," said Poudel, chairman of Srijanshil Apangata Samaj. "I have voted in the past, but over the years, it doesn't look like authorities have made any attempts to ease the voting process for people like us."

Kima Rokaya, 25, from Khaptadchana Rural Municipality, Bajhang, is paralysed from the waist down.

In the 2017 elections, her family members carried her to the polling booth. This reliance on her family members to exercise her franchise

led to a compromised vote from her, she says.

"The polling desk was at a height

and since I couldn't stand, my relative stamped the ballot paper and dropped it into the box without even showing me," she told the Post. "Till date, I don't know who I 'voted' for."

Elections are a celebration in democratic countries as they are supposed to strengthen democracy, incorporating the inclusion principle. But in Nepal, people with different forms of disabilities feel neglected and excluded as the state and its agencies have failed to make the electoral process accessible to them, depriving them of their participation in the franchise, their fundamental right guaranteed by the country's constitution and laws.

Article 42 (1) of the Constitution of Nepal says persons with disabilities shall have the right to participate in the state bodies on the basis of the principle of inclusion.

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Bhairahawa airport to open on May 16, but Modi won't land there

Nepal's second international airport, which has failed to market itself, would have drawn attention if the Indian prime minister landed there, officials say.

SANGAM PRASAIN & ANIL GIRI
KATHMANDU, MAY 9

An Airbus A320 of Jazeera Airways of Kuwait is scheduled to touch down at Gautam Buddha International Airport in Bhairahawa on Monday morning and taxi into Nepal's aviation history.

The arrival of the direct service from Kuwait at 7am will mark the official inauguration of Nepal's second international airport in 73 years after Kathmandu.

Hundreds of high-level government officials and members of the diplomatic community will be attending the inaugural ceremony planned for the thrice-blessed day of Buddha Jayanti when the Buddha was born, attained enlightenment and passed into nirvana.

The airport has been envisaged as the international gateway to Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha located 18 km from Bhairahawa.

"Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba will be inaugurating the new airport," Govinda Prasad Dahal, general manager of Gautam Buddha International Airport, said. "We have almost completed the preparations."

At the same time as the inau-

guration ceremony, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will overfly the new airport and land in Lumbini.

Four helipads are being constructed on the premises of Lumbini, which is a World Heritage Site, for Modi's visit.

From the airport, Deuba is scheduled to travel to Lumbini to officially open the International Meditation Centre and Assembly Hall at 10am. He will meet his Indian counterpart in Lumbini and the two heads of government will participate in a special function organised by the Lumbini Development Trust. Deuba and Modi are scheduled to lay the foundation stone for a vihar to be built with Indian assistance in the Lumbini area.

But there's something.

Modi will skip the airport. He will directly land in Lumbini instead.

Officials said they don't know why. "No idea," said an official at the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal.

A former chief of the civil aviation body told the Post that it was a "diplomatic failure."

"When two separate big events are held at the same place, one event will definitely be in the shadows," said Sanjeev Gautam, former director general of the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal.

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Revenue collection hit by import curbs amid falling foreign exchange reserves

Sluggish capital spending and liquidity crunch also blamed.

PRITHV MAN SHRESTHA
KATHMANDU, MAY 9

The government and the central bank’s efforts at reigning in imports amid depleting foreign exchange reserves and surging balance of payment deficit have started to hit the government’s revenues.

Nepal’s revenue is heavily dependent on imports with the government aiming to collect over half of the total targeted revenue from customs offices.

The government plans to collect Rs1,050.82 billion in revenue this fiscal year 2021-22 with an aim to collect Rs530 billion from customs offices.

But the customs offices are struggling to meet the collection target with imports slowing down in the last few months especially after the central bank announced a number of measures to discourage non-essential imports.

“The collection target for Baisakh (mid-April to mid-May) for the Department of Customs is Rs44 billion,” said Punya Bikram Khadka, information officer at the department. “Till Baisakh 24 [May 7], we have been able to collect just Rs29 billion.”

With the government closing international borders 72 hours before the May 13 local elections, Khadka does not think his office will be able to meet the collection target.

Since mid-December last year, monthly import figures have been falling.

In the first five months of the current fiscal year, the customs department had collected more than its target, according to Khadka. But with the government tightening imports especially of vehicles and non-essential goods which were major sources of revenue, the revenue collection has taken a hit.

For example, in December last year, the central bank made it mandatory for importers to maintain a 100 percent cash margin for opening a letter of credit (LC) to import certain scheduled goods.

As per the Nepal Rastra Bank, traders need to maintain a 100 percent cash margin to import alcoholic drinks; tobacco; silver; furniture; sugar and foods that contain sweets; glucose; mineral water; energy drinks; cosmetics; shampoo; hair oils and colours; caps; footwear; umbrellas; and construction materials such as bricks, marble, tiles and ceramics, among others.

Importers of motorcycles and scooters and diesel-powered private automobiles also need to maintain a 50 percent cash margin with banks for opening letters of credit.

And the central bank’s yet another directive issued on February 9 increased the number of import items requiring 100 percent cash margin to 43 while it fixed the cash margin need-

ed for importing four types of goods at 50 percent.

“These measures discouraged the import of revenue-generating items and affected the revenue collection,” Khadka said.

As of May 7, the department was expected to collect revenue worth Rs431 billion. “We have collected Rs419 billion,” said Khadka. “Overall revenue target for the customs department by the end of Baishakh is Rs441 billion. “As international borders are closed ahead of the local elections, meeting the target is almost impossible.”

Since mid-December last year, the monthly import figures have been falling. In the mid November-mid December period, Nepal imported goods worth Rs188.1 billion. And in the following four months, imports stood at Rs160.9 billion, Rs148.1 billion, Rs161.27 billion and Rs158 billion, respectively, according to central bank and customs department statistics.

Khadka said that meeting the target for the entire fiscal year will also be a herculean task if not impossible because the impact of the complete ban on the import of 10 types of products is yet to be seen. “There will not be a large-scale deficit in revenue collection against the target though,” he added.

In late April, the government imposed a complete ban on the import of all kinds of readymade liquor [excluding raw materials], readymade cigarettes and tobacco products, and snacks like Lay’s potato chips and Kurkure, a crunchy snack.

The government has also banned the import of diamonds, excluding those used as industrial raw materials. The government has also banned the import of mobile phone sets costing more than \$600 and colour television sets of over 32-inch screen.

Imports of jeeps, cars and vans, except for ambulances and hearses, have also been banned. Likewise, the import of motorcycles above 250 cc, all kinds of toys and playing cards have also been banned.

Not only revenue collection through the customs offices, tax offices responsible for collecting tax generated from internal economic activities have also reported a fall in collection against their targets.

This has raised questions if internal economic activities have also slumped along with worsening indicators of the external sector of the economy.

According to the Inland Revenue Department (IRD), it failed to meet the revenue collection target by over Rs32.75 billion by the third quarter of the current fiscal year that began in mid-July 2021. It collected Rs342.69 billion against the target of Rs375.44 billion as of mid-April, according to the IRD.

IRD Director General Ritesh Shakya told the Post last month that two factors could be responsible for the lower revenue. “One is continued sluggish capital spending, which has affected the VAT liability,” said Shakya. “And the liquidity crunch in the banking sector has affected economic activities.”



Vehicles negotiating a narrow underpass flooded by rainwaters at Balkumari in Lalitpur, Monday.

POST PHOTO: ELITE JOSHI

Over 3 million Pfizer and Moderna vaccine doses to be rolled out after local elections

Four million Sinovac-CoronaVac doses gifted by China to be rolled out only after all other Covid vaccine doses are used up.

ARJUN POUDEL
KATHMANDU, MAY 9

The Ministry of Health and Population said that it will roll out over 3 million doses of Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines only after the May 13 local elections.

Covid vaccine uptake has declined significantly of late and the chances of vaccine doses going to waste will be high if vaccination is resumed before the local elections, officials say.

“We will roll out the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines only after the local elections,” said Dr Surendra Chaurasia, chief of the Logistic Management Section under the Department of Health Services. “There is a high chance of doses going to waste for a lack of takers before the elections.”

The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine doses, which are being stored at minus 80 degrees Celsius in ultra cold freezers, can be stored in normal temperatures (2 to 8 degrees Celsius) for up to 31 days. If not used within 31 days of the rollout, the vaccine doses must be discarded.

Likewise, the Moderna vaccine also needs to be stored at minus 20 degrees Celsius and can be stored in normal temperatures (2 to 8 degrees Celsius) for up to 31 days. If not used within 31 days of the rollout, Moderna doses too must be discarded.

The Health Ministry said that there are over 3.1 million doses of Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines in



REUTERS

In this file photo, a vial of the Moderna Covid-19 vaccine is seen at a local clinic in Aschaffenburg, Germany in January 2021.

its central store in Kathmandu.

The government has requested the COVAX facility to halt shipment of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine due to storage problems. The facility, the United Nations-backed international vaccine-sharing scheme, had committed to supply 9.2 million doses of the said vaccine, supplied 1.5 million doses in March. The supply of the rest of the doses has been put on hold at the request of the Nepal government.

With a decline in the coronavirus cases in the country, very few people are seeking Covid jobs. The Health Ministry had decided to administer booster shots to all people, who were

administered with the second dose of Covid-19 vaccine three months ago, but there has been no significant increase in the uptake.

On Monday, 38,359 people were vaccinated against Covid.

So far, 19,701,003 people or 67.5 percent of the total population have been fully immunised. The Health Ministry said that so far 3,665,435 people have taken Covid booster shots as of Sunday.

Currently, there are 190 active cases of coronavirus throughout the country.

The Health Ministry said that there are over 10 million doses of Covid-19 vaccine in stock. Of them, four mil-

lion doses are the Sinovac-CoronaVac vaccine provided by China in grant assistance. The vaccine doses were supplied in March.

Officials at the Health Ministry said that the Sinovac-CoronaVac Covid-19 vaccine will be rolled out only after all the vaccine doses in stock are used up. The Sinovac-CoronaVac Covid-19 vaccine has a shelf life of two years.

So far the country has received 53,381,570 doses of various vaccines—AstraZeneca, Vero Cell, Moderna, Janssen, Sinovac-CoronaVac and Pfizer-BioNTech.

Meanwhile, the Health Ministry has urged the public to follow safety measures to mitigate the risk of Covid infection in light of a new surge in cases in neighbouring India.

“We would like to urge everyone to get inoculated for their own safety and that of their family members” reads the press statement issued by the Health Ministry on Sunday. “Immunisation centres have been in operation and will resume operations after the election day.”

India on Monday registered 3,207 new Covid infections and 29 deaths. Officials said that the risk of a new surge of the virus in Nepal has been growing given the uptick in cases in India since cross border traffic is registered in the thousands daily through various border points.

Thousands of migrant workers toiling in India are believed to have returned to the country for the local elections scheduled for Friday.



WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

The road to the truth is difficult.
A path filled with division, diversion and danger.
A path filled with validation and temptation.
There are voices to be heard and stories to be told.
The road is long and the road is hard.
But this is the road we walk.

Without fear or favour.

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