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AFP/RSS

Police personnel detain Cockroach Janta Party supporters during a protest in Ahmedabad on Wednesday in solidarity with the ongoing protest at New Delhi's Jantar Mantar demanding the resignation of India's Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over alleged NEET exam irregularities. **(Report on Pg 6)**

PM Shah's outreach amuses stakeholders, puzzles observers

Business leaders say meetings have renewed confidence, but analysts argue implementation ultimately depends on ministries that were largely missing from discussions.

JAYA SINGH MAHARA & DURGA DULAL
KATHMANDU, JULY 22

After 100 days in office Prime Minister Balendra Shah has held marathon consultations with business leaders, professionals and other stakeholders in an apparent bid to restore confidence in an administration struggling to convince the private sector that it can deliver economic reforms.

The meetings have been widely welcomed by attendants, who say the prime minister has spent hours listening to their concerns and promising solutions. Yet they have also prompted questions over why responsible ministers have been absent from most of the interactions.

Finance Minister Swarnim Wagle did not attend meetings with representatives of the private sector, capital market or insurance industry. Minister for Industry, Commerce and Supplies Gauri Kumari Yadav was also absent from discussions with industrialists and manufacturers. Energy, Water Resources and Irrigation Minister Biraj Bhakta Shrestha did not participate in talks with independent power producers, while Infrastructure Development Minister Sunil Lamsal was absent from discussions with construction contractors.

Only a handful of meetings included the relevant ministers. Education Minister Sasmit Pokharel accompanied Shah during discussions with newly appointed vice-chancellors of various universities on July 14, while Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation Minister Khadak Raj Paudel attended a meeting with Hotel Association Nepal representatives a day later.

The present government was formed on March 27 under the leadership of the Rastriya Swatantra Party senior leader Shah. The Shah government completed its 100 days on July 4. Although the administration has claimed it laid the foundation for good governance and initiated several major reforms during the period, economic indicators have remained weak and business confidence has continued to decline. Against that backdrop, the prime minister himself has taken the lead in reaching out to different sectors.

Participants in several meetings, however, said they were surprised not to find the ministers directly responsible for implementing many of the commitments being discussed.

Prime Minister Shah has held more than 10 formal consultations with different groups. Despite the breadth of the agenda, ministers from related portfolios have featured quite rarely.

The absence has fuelled debate because any commitments made during the meetings ultimately require implementation through line ministries. Officials and governance experts say excluding ministers from such discussions risks creating uncertainty over responsibility and decision-making.

POST PHOTO

Balendra Shah

PMO defends choice of ministers, saying attendance depends on nature of discussion.

Former chief secretary Bimal Koirala downplayed concerns, arguing that the prime minister, as the head of government, has every authority to hear grievances directly and steer solutions.

"It does not carry a significant meaning if ministers are absent from these meetings," said Koirala. "Whether the knife falls on the apple or the apple falls on the knife, it is the apple that gets cut. The important thing is solving the problem. If the prime minister himself listens to concerns and seeks solutions, that is even better. After all, the ministers are members of his Cabinet."

Former minister Kulman Ghising, however, believes the discussions would have been more effective had ministers participated alongside the prime minister.

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Congress rift widens with Deuba faction veering towards split

Dissident leaders announce an August 14 national gathering and warn of forming a new party if efforts to restore unity in the country's oldest political force fail.

KUL CHANDRA NEUPANE
KATHMANDU, JULY 22

Six months after a special general convention triggered an internal power struggle in the Nepali Congress, the party's deepening rift remains unresolved, with leaders loyal to former president Sher Bahadur Deuba moving ahead with their plan to form a separate party.

On Wednesday the two rival factions marked the 44th BP Memorial Day by holding separate programmes. Addressing a gathering organised by the dissenting faction, leaders warned that they would form a new party if efforts to reconcile with the Congress establishment led by Gagan Thapa failed.

The faction also announced a national gathering in Kathmandu on August 14 to chart its future political course.

Purna Bahadur Khadka, who leads the Deuba camp, said that discussions on accommodation of the dissenters were not aimed at securing positions for themselves but were intended to achieve a "dignified unity" with the party headquarters.

"We are not going to remain inactive. We are ready to move forward by bringing young leaders to the forefront and standing as their shield," Khadka said, hinting at the possibility of forming another party. "We do not want anything for ourselves. We fought even during the Panchayat era for dignity. We would rather die than compromise on our dignity."

Analysts call on both sides to reconcile, ask party establishment to accommodate dissidents.

Meanwhile, the establishment faction led by party president Thapa observed the memorial for the late party founder BP Koirala with a two-day event. After organising a "Green Run" on Wednesday to raise awareness about climate change, it held a discussion on Thursday on Koirala's political philosophy, democratic socialism and contemporary challenges facing the country.

But the commemorations also laid bare the party's deepening divisions.

Senior leader Shekhar Koirala attended Wednesday's programme organised by the Deuba faction, a move that drew attention as he had previously stayed away from events hosted by the dissident camp.

Others attending the function included senior leaders Prakash Man Singh, Krishna Prasad Sitaula, Bimalendra Nidhi, Shashank Koirala, Bijaya Kumar Gachhadar and Prakash Sharan Mahat.

Badri Pandey, a leader close to Shekhar, said the senior leader had informed his supporters that he would attend the function.

"We knew in advance that Shekhar dai would attend. Once he made up his mind, we did not try to stop him, but we decided not to go," Pandey said.

At the event, Koirala took aim at Thapa's leadership, accusing the party of drifting towards authoritarianism.

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Chinese envoy's concern over Tibetan studies seminar in Kathmandu

Organisers say event purely an academic gathering as Beijing fears influence by Dalai Lama supporters.

Zhang Maoming

ANIL GIRI
KATHMANDU, JULY 22

Chinese Ambassador to Nepal Zhang Maoming has expressed concerns over the upcoming 17th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies to be organised from August 23-29 in Kathmandu.

Ambassador Zhang met Foreign Secretary Amrit Bahadur Rai on Tuesday and discussed the upcoming event, said one senior foreign ministry official. The Chinese envoy drew the attention of the foreign secretary and cautioned that the event could be used by supporters of the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama, according to the official.

Researchers and experts on Tibetan studies from around the globe will gather next month.

The envoy said some individuals could speak against China and in support of Tibet, and urged officials to make sure that no such things happen, the official told the Post.

Hundreds of researchers, scholars and experts on Tibetan studies from around the globe will gather at the event.

According to the website of the International Association of Tibetan Studies, the seminar will be organised jointly by the Himalaya Centre for Asian Studies, Kathmandu University (HiCAS, KU); and the Kathmandu University Centre for Buddhist Studies at Rangjung Yeshe Institute (KU-CBS at RYI). The conveners are Prof Sagar Sharma (HiCAS) and Prof Thomas Doctor (KU-CBS at RYI).

Some Kathmandu-based individuals sympathetic to Beijing's position on Tibet have also expressed concern over the event saying that promoting Tibetan language, culture and history could ultimately be interpreted as support for the Dalai Lama's views.

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Nepal's 'free' schooling comes with a long list of fees

Students from grades 9 to 12 pay thousands of rupees in government-imposed charges every year, even as the constitution and the Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education guarantee free education up to the secondary level.

SUDEEP KAINI
KATHMANDU, JULY 22

Despite the constitutional guarantee of free education up to the secondary level, the government continues to charge students thousands of rupees in mandatory fees under various headings, generating more than Rs2.5 billion in annual revenue from students alone.

Article 31 of the constitution guarantees every citizen the right to free and compulsory education up to the basic level (grade 8) and free education up to the secondary level (grade 12). To enforce this provision, Parliament enacted the Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education in 2018, followed by the Compulsory and Free Education Regulations in 2020.

Yet students and their parents must bear more than a dozen government-imposed charges throughout secondary school.

The continued collection of these fees has raised questions over whether the state has fulfilled its promise of free education up to grade 12.

A student pays more than Rs5,000 to the government in various mandatory charges between grades 9 and 12. Every year, between 400,000 and 600,000 students enrol in those grades. Based on enrolment figures, the government collects more than Rs2.5 billion annually through registration, examination and academic certificate fees alone.

It also continues to levy numerous additional charges that critics say are incompatible with the constitutional guarantee of free education.

POST FILE PHOTO

A teacher instructs a class at Nunthala Secondary School in Nunthala, Khotang, in this undated photo.

According to the National Examinations Board, every student enrolled in both community and private schools must pay a registration fee of Rs300 upon joining grade 9.

When they reach grade 10, schools collect an examination application fee of Rs500 from each student and deposit it with the government. Narayan Pokhrel, information officer at the Board, said students must also pay Rs400 for subject registration in grade 11. Around 400,000 students enrol in grade 11 every year.

After paying fees in grades 9, 10 and 11, students are required to pay another Rs800 examination application fee in grade 12. Even after passing the examinations, they must pay additional charges to obtain their academic certificates for both grade 10 and grade 12.

While the Ministry of Education and Sports has not prohibited subordinate agencies from charging students, the Board and the Office of the Controller of Examinations continue to collect these fees, including from students attending community schools, where education is supposed to be free.

"The government itself instructs schools to collect registration, subject registration, examination application and certificate fees from students and deposit the money with the authorities," the principal of a community school in Kathmandu told Kantipur.

Long queues of students can be seen every day at the Board's central and provincial offices to obtain academic certificates or correct errors in them. In many cases, schools collect the fees directly from students before forwarding them to the Board.

Sneha Rupakheti, who passed grade 12 this year, said she paid Rs1,500 to receive her transcript, migration certificate and provisional certificate. She said she had already paid another Rs2,000 in registration, examination application and subject registration fees between grades 9 and 12.

She also spent Rs1,500 to obtain her grade 10 certificate.

Parents have complained that some schools charge students more than the government-prescribed fees and retain part of the additional amount for their own expenses. Students and parents also allege that private schools routinely collect more than the fees fixed by the board.

According to information provided by the board, students in grades 11 and 12 are subject to fees under 20 different categories.

Students must pay Rs500 for a supplementary certificate and Rs500 each for duplicate copies of academic certificates. A permanent certificate costs an additional Rs1,000. The board charges Rs500 to authenticate an original certificate and another Rs500 to verify copies of mark sheets, grade sheets and certificates.

>> Continued on page 2

POST PHOTO: DEEPAK KC

A mason constructs brick platforms around roadside trees at Ratna Park, Kathmandu, on Tuesday.

Officials defend registration, exam and certificate fees as essential, critics call them unconstitutional

>> Continued from page 1

Students dissatisfied with their examination results must pay Rs1,000 to apply for re-totalling, which is verification of total marks awarded on an answer sheet. This year, around 32,000 grade 12 students submitted online applications for re-totalling after paying the fee.

Even when mistakes are made by board officials, examiners or teachers, students must pay to have their results reviewed. In this year's Secondary Education Examination (SEE), around 34,000 students applied for re-totalling, and the results of more than 1,800 were revised after errors were found.

Students who remain dissatisfied after re-totalling must pay Rs1,500 to view their grade 12 answer sheets. If they then seek a full re-evaluation, they must pay another Rs2,000.

The board also charges Rs500 to correct errors in names or dates of birth on certificates, Rs500 to trace a symbol number and Rs50 for a duplicate payment receipt, according to Pokhrel.

Students in grade 9 and 10 are also subjected to more than a dozen different government-imposed fees.

For grade 10, students must pay Rs500 each for a grade sheet, original certificate, migration certificate, verification of original certificate, verification of duplicate certificate and duplicate copy of lost certificate. Officials said these fees are deposited directly into the government's revenue account.

Students seeking to consolidate academic certificates must pay another Rs500.

The fees for re-totalling, viewing answer-sheets and re-evaluation differ between the SEE and grade 12 examinations. For the SEE, students must pay Rs500 per subject for re-totalling, while answer-sheet viewing and re-evaluation cost Rs2,000 each.

The Office of the Controller of Examinations also charges between Rs250 and Rs500 to correct names, surnames and dates of birth, including English-language dates of birth, on SEE certificates.

The National Examinations Board defends the charges, stating that they are essential to keep the examination system running.

Janga Bahadur Aryal, member secretary of the board, said the fees have long been collected as per decisions made by the board.

"The money collected from grade 11 and 12 students is deposited directly into the board's account. It is used to run the board's offices, manage staff, conduct examinations, publish results and carry out all of our operations. The government does not provide us with a separate budget," Aryal said. "The money collected from students in grades 9 and 10, however, is deposited into the government's revenue account."

The government collects around Rs180 million annually from grade 9 registration fees alone. It raises another Rs250 million from the same students through grade 10 examination application fees.

Officials at the Office of the Controller of Examinations said it collects around Rs600 million in revenue each year. Of that amount, roughly Rs350 million is generated from the Secondary Education Examination, while the remaining revenue is deposited into the Ministry of Finance's revenue account.

Yet the Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education explicitly prohibits such charges.

The law states that providing education up to the secondary level is the responsibility of the state. Section 4 of the Act provides that "the responsibility for providing education up to the secondary level shall rest with the State."

The Compulsory and Free Education Regulations also stipulate that no fees should be charged.

Former education minister Bidya Bhattarai said she had tried to end the practice while in office.

In January 2025, Bhattarai secured a decision prohibiting the collection of fees from students. The proposal was endorsed by the National Development Problem Solving Committee, chaired by the prime minister, and forwarded to the Ministry of Finance. However, it was never implemented.

"On the one hand, the law guarantees free education. On the other hand, state agencies themselves continue to collect fees," Bhattarai said.

"At the time, we agreed that registration fees for grades 9 and 11 should be scrapped immediately, while decisions on examination and certificate fees would be taken gradually," she said. "But I was removed as education minister before the decision could be implemented."

She said the ministry had proposed that students should register only once during secondary education and that the registration should be free.

"It is contradictory for the government to tell local governments and schools not to charge students in the name of free education while the federal government itself continues to collect money from them," Bhattarai said.

She added that her ministry had also prepared a roadmap for implementing the Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education.

The Office of the Auditor General has repeatedly questioned the legality of the fees.

In its 2024 annual report, the constitutional watchdog noted that despite constitutional and legal provisions guaranteeing free education up to the secondary level, the National Examinations Board continues to collect registration, examination and certificate fees from secondary school students.

Nepal has 27,010 community schools and 8,941 private schools. According to the Ministry of Education, around 5.2 million students study in community schools, and another 3 million attend private schools. The ministry said students in both public and private schools are required to pay these government-imposed fees.

Shiva Kumar Sapkota, joint secretary and spokesperson for the Ministry of Education, acknowledged that the government's fee structure should be revised to bring it into line with the Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education.

"The ministry has been working to remove the provisions that allow these fees to be charged," Sapkota said. "However, because these fees are also a source of government revenue, the issue does not fall under the Ministry of Education alone."

He argued that the fees collected by the Board are determined under its authority as an autonomous institution.

Education expert Binay Kumar Kushiyait said successive governments have failed to implement the Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education.

"Under the constitution, no one should be charging students any fee up to grade 12," he said. "Successive governments have failed. No government has shown the commitment, accountability or responsibility needed to ensure genuinely free education."

Kushiyait said the government continues to rely on student fees because it has failed to allocate sufficient funding to the education sector.

He also pointed out that many community schools are forced to charge students and parents simply to cover operating expenses.

"Community schools serve the poorest children, Dalits, students from remote and marginalised communities, and children with disabilities," he said. "Instead of charging them, the state should make every aspect of their education free and provide scholarships to encourage them to stay in school."

Cabinet endorses education, health tax repeal

The government on Wednesday scrapped the 3 percent equity levy passed in the fiscal budget.

YAGYA BANJADE
KATHMANDU, JULY 22

The government officially scrapped the three percent equity tax levied through the fiscal budget on education and health services.

Government spokesperson Sasmit Pokharel said that the Cabinet meeting held on Wednesday decided to withdraw the tax, which had taken effect on July 17. Furthermore, officials committed to refunding all duties collected from citizens over the past week directly into their bank accounts within 50 days.

The Ministry of Finance will execute the refund process. "The Cabinet's decision is sent to the finance ministry for implementation," said Dipa Dahal, Press and Research Expert to Prime Minister Balendra Shah. "The finance ministry will initiate all necessary procedures to execute the order."

The three percent tax, introduced through the current fiscal year's Financial Act, sparked widespread public criticism. Responding to public outrage, Prime Minister Shah announced the tax withdrawal on social media on Tuesday, prompting Wednesday's formal Cabinet decision.

Under the new directive, the Prime Minister's Office will instruct the finance ministry to issue orders to the departments such as the Inland Revenue Department to process refunds. "If individuals fail to claim their money or if technical issues arise, the funds will be deposited into the government's consolidated fund," noted the secretariat. The Prime Minister's Office clarified that as an executive order, the decision takes immediate effect without requiring Gazette publication.

Finance Minister Swarnim Wagle confirmed that the education and health tax has been suspended for the time being following consultations with the prime minister. He said the ministry has already prepared a proposal for its withdrawal. The Cabinet is expected to decide on the matter, after which the government's decision will gain legal validity.

Until then, the three percent tax remains legally enforceable. This has created uncertainty among taxpayers, government officials and tax authorities over the treatment of amounts collected since July 17.

"The proposal for the withdrawal of the tax has been prepared and it will be implemented after Cabinet approval," a finance ministry official said. "The issue of refunds will also depend on the Cabinet's decision. If the Cabinet decides to return the collected amount, taxpayers will receive refunds. Otherwise, it will remain with the government."

Officials earlier said no decision on refunds could be made before the Cabinet formally resolves the matter.

Shah announced the rollback of the tax on Tuesday following widespread criticism from the public and stakeholders. He said the decision was taken after consultations with Finance Minister Wagle.

The prime minister said the tax was originally introduced to mobilise resources to improve education and healthcare services in remote and disadvantaged areas, support marginalised communities, expand health insurance coverage and widen the tax base.

He said the government had taken public concerns seriously and remained committed to correcting decisions that failed to meet citizens' expectations.

Shah also reiterated that the government would continue with plans requiring private hospitals to reserve 10 percent of beds and private colleges and universities to allocate 10 percent of seats for underprivileged citizens through a transparent process.

Tibetan studies seminar sparks Beijing's concern

>> Continued from page 1

"Recently the government allowed Tibetan refugees to celebrate the birthday of the Dalai Lama and now this event is happening," said one observer who has been following the Tibetan matter in Nepal. "That is why the Chinese side expressed reservations over the upcoming event."

The Chinese ambassador, however, did not submit any written reservation or called for cancellation of the event, but voiced his concerns, the foreign ministry official told the Post.

Those who registered for the conference had to pay $360 for early registration and $440 for late registration, the Post has learnt. Registration for the event closed on June 15.

One official at the Chinese Embassy confirmed that Ambassador Zhang met with foreign secretary Rai but asked the Post to seek comment from the foreign ministry.

As per the itinerary, the opening Ceremony will be held at Kathmandu University's Dhulikhel campus, and the rest of the programmes will be held at Hotel Soaltee.

The board members of the International Association for Tibetan Studies are Daniel Berounský (Czech Republic), Geshe Nyima Woser Choekhortshang Rinpoche (Nepal), Hildegard Diemberger (Austria), Dorji Wangchuk (Bhutan), Iwao Kazushi (Japan). Lama Jabb (UK), Pema Choedon (Norway), Karma Phuntsho (Bhutan), Françoise Pommaret (France), Jarmila Ptáčková (Czech Republic), Françoise Robin (France)., Ulrike Roesler (UK) and Yudru Tsomu (China).

Formally established in 1979 at the University of Oxford, it operates as a non-political academic body dedicated to advancing research in Tibetan history, religion, linguistics, and art.

Prof Sharma of Kathmandu University said that scholars and professors from world-renowned universities like Oxford and Cambridge will attend the conference. Scholars from 39 countries who are experts in the field of Tibetan Studies will participate.

"It's not a pro-Dalai Lama event. Huge numbers of Chinese professors and scholars are also attending. The Chinese embassy also knows about it. We have also informed different government agencies," said Sharma.

Government of Nepal
Ministry of Infrastructure Development
Department of Roads
Project Directorate (ADB)
Bishalnagar, Kathmandu

ADB Project No. 59156-001: SASEC Highway Improvement and Ecosystem Restoration Project (SHINER)
Construction Supervision Consultant (SHINER-CSC)
Notice for Shortlisting of Consultants

(First Date of Publication: 23rd July 2026)

In connection with our Consulting Service Recruitment Notice (CSRN) calling for Expression of Interest (EOI) for the Construction Supervision Consultant for SASEC Highway Improvement and Ecosystem Restoration Project published on 25th February 2026 in the ADB's CMS portal, the names of the shortlisted consulting firms are given below:

SN	Name of Consultant	Country of Incorporation	Type of Association
1	Dasan Consultants Co. Ltd. Dohwa Engineering Co. Ltd Soil Test (P) Ltd.	Korea Korea Nepal	Lead JV Sub-Consultant
2	Intercontinental Consultants & Technocrats Pvt. Ltd. Katahira & Engineers International ITECO Nepal (P) Ltd.	India Japan Nepal	Lead JV Sub-Consultant
3	IRD Engineering S.R.L ISAN Corporation SILT Consultants (P.) Ltd.	Italy Korea Nepal	Lead JV Sub-Consultant
4	KCIeng Co. Ltd. SOOSUNG Engineering Co. Ltd. Tech Studio of Engineering	Korea Korea Nepal	Lead JV Sub-Consultant
5	Kunhwa Engineering & Consulting Co. Ltd. Lea Associates South Asia Private Limited Geocom International Pvt. Ltd.	Korea India Nepal	Lead JV Sub-Consultant
6	Renardet S.A. Dongsung Engineering Co. Ltd. Total Management Services Pvt. Ltd.	Switzerland Korea Nepal	Lead JV Sub-Consultant

All shortlisted consultants are requested to collect Request for Proposal (RFP) document from Project Directorate (ADB) office, Bishalnagar during office hours.

PROJECT DIRECTOR

PUBLIC NOTICE

I, Ashish Poddar Holding Passport No C2142817, Indian Citizen, S/o Sarwan Poddar and Vidya Poddar R/o, in India, 101 Burmese colony Jaipur Rajasthan India, /In Nepal, Ward-13 Tahachal Kathmandu Nepal; And Nidhi Poddar, Holding passport No.T9728983, D/oPawan Kumar Matanhelia And Chanda Matanhelia, R/o, 101 Burmese colony Jaipur Rajasthan India /In Nepal, ward 13 Tahachal Kathmandu Nepal Have Got Married at Kathmandu Nepal on 23 April 2000, As per Indian Traditions. Since Then We have been living as Husband and Wife. We have Published This Notice For Registration of our Marriage at Embassy of India Kathmandu. If anyone has any objection to the Marriage he / she can contact +977-9851107021 and Embassy of India Kathmandu on cons.kaaaathmandu@meaa.gov.in

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PRESS NOTICE

SJVN Arun-3 Power Development Company Pvt. Ltd. (SAPDC) (the Employer) invites online e-tenders on Open Tender Basis from eligible Companies/firms of Nepal through e-portal for the following tender:

Contract No. / RFx No.	Description of Work	Publishing date on website	Last date for Submission/ Opening of bid Proposals
PPR-230/2026 (Rfx No.8000001360)	Supply, Installation & Testing of Desktop Computer, Laptop and Heavy-Duty Printer at SAPDC office Complex Tumlingtar, Distt. Sankhuwasabha.	22.07.2026	**Online Submission:** 13.08.2026 upto 1530 Hrs. **Offline Submission** at (Tumlingtar Office): 20.08.2026 at 1730 Hrs. **Bid Opening:** 13.08.2026 at 1600 Hrs.

Further, Amendment(s) / Notification(s)/ Corrigendum etc. shall be issued on www.sapdc.com.np / https://sjvn.nic.in / https://etender.sjvn.co.in websites only.

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Congress factions hold separate events to commemorate founding leader BP

>> Continued from page 1

"The Nepali Congress was founded to fight authoritarianism," he said. "Now authoritarian tendencies are emerging within the party itself, and they must be stopped."

At the centre of the dispute is the fate of the 111 office bearers and central members elected at the party's last convention. The dissident faction wants them inducted into the new Central Working Committee as a whole.

The establishment faction rejects the demand, arguing that accommodating all 111 leaders would create a parallel power centre, institutionalise factional politics and increase pressure for a formal split.

Joint general secretary Prakash Snehi said the party would not accept collective integration under any circumstances.

"A separate party has not been formed, nor are there differences over policy, principles or programmes. The party president, vice-presidents and other office bearers made serious efforts to achieve unity within the party statute. But consensus broke down over the demand to induct all leaders elected at the 14th general convention," Snehi said.

"Collective integration is not possible. It would be a regressive step, and the party statute does not allow regressive decisions."

Leaders close to president Gagan Thapa argue that the arrangement adopted after the 2007 merger between the Nepali Congress and Nepali Congress (Democratic), under which positions were shared on a 60:40 basis, entrenched factional quotas that continue to shape the party. Repeating that model, they say, would undermine the reform agenda endorsed by the special general convention.

January's special general convention declared the party's transition to "Congress 2.0", pledging to move away from the old political culture and adopt a new organisational model. But senior leader Shekhar Koirala rejected the concept and argued there has been no change in the political ideology of the Congress.

"What exactly is Congress 2.0? No one really understands what it means," he said. "There is also talk of social democracy, but the Congress's social democratic ideology has always been rooted in BP Koirala's socialist philosophy."

The establishment also argues that carrying over the old power structure into the new executive would undermine its promise of renewal. Newly elected office bearers are also concerned that accommodating all former CWC members could weaken their own prospects ahead of the 15th general convention, although Snehi denied that such concerns were influencing the leadership.

POST PHOTO: DIPESH DARSHANDHARI

Leaders of the Nepali Congress dissident faction pictured at a function organised to mark the 44th death anniversary of BP Koirala, the party's founding leader and ideologue, at Nepal Academy in Kamaladi, Kathmandu, on Wednesday.

The Deuba-Khadka faction, however, sees collective integration as essential to preserving its political relevance. Its leaders argue that individual appointments would weaken their bargaining power and reduce their influence in the next general convention.

"The establishment must accept one of two options: either collectively integrate the leaders elected at the 14th general convention into the new structure or create a powerful mechanism to ensure a free and fair 15th general convention," Prakash Sharan Mahat said at the Wednesday event. "Otherwise, the national gathering will decide our future [course]."

Many leaders in the old establishment believe an organised faction remains essential to maintaining political influence. With the Congress long shaped by factional bargaining and quota-sharing, they argue that only collective strength can preserve their standing within the party.

Although few of them are seen as contenders for the party presidency, many still hope to influence the next leadership through a balance of power. Khadka is 70 now, while Krishna Prasad Sitaula is 79, Shekhar Koirala and Prakash Man Singh are both 75, Bimalendra Nidhi is 70 and Shashank Koirala is 67.

> **Dissident camp has accused Thapa of failing to make a genuine effort to restore unity.**

Former president Sher Bahadur Deuba, who is currently abroad, sent a message saying he would return to Nepal soon. Leaders close to Deuba said preparations for the August 14 national gathering are being made in consultation with him, and efforts are under way to bring him back before the event.

If no agreement is reached by then, the question of who would lead a new political force remains unresolved.

Many leaders in the Deuba camp believe Shekhar Koirala would be the most credible figure to lead such a party. However, both Koirala and Khadka have privately told close associates that they are reluctant to split the Congress.

Party leaders view Koirala's appearance at Wednesday's programme in that context. Badri Pandey, a leader close to him, said his group had no knowledge of any plan for Koirala to lead a breakaway party.

"We stayed away from the special general convention because we did not want the party to split," Pandey said. "For the same reason, we did not attend Wednesday's programme, even though Shekhar Dai did. We feared our presence could be interpreted as supporting a division."

He said leaders like him were left in a difficult position on BP Memorial Day, as they felt unwelcome at both camps' events.

If Shekhar Koirala declines to lead a new party, some leaders in the dissident camp have floated former general secretary Shashank Koirala as an alternative, arguing that BP Koirala's son could appeal to the party's traditional support base. Nidhi, Singh and Sitaula are also seen as possible contenders, although the faction has yet to decide.

The dissident camp has accused party president Thapa of failing to make a genuine effort to restore unity.

"Unity is not possible unless President Thapa truly wants it," Khadka said.

Thapa also faces the challenge of competing with the Rastriya Swatantra Party, which draws support from a similar democratic constituency. He is now caught between accommodating the party's old guard and advancing the reform agenda endorsed by the special general convention.

The Congress has a history of both splits and reunifications. The Nepal National Congress was established in 1947, while the Nepal Democratic Congress was formed in 1948. The two merged in 1950 to create the Nepali Congress and lead the armed struggle against the Rana regime.

The party split again in 2002 when Sher Bahadur Deuba formed the Nepali Congress (Democratic), before reunifying in 2007.

The current dispute reflects a broader contest between the Congress's traditional leadership and a younger generation seeking change. The dissident camp includes leaders linked to the party's historic legacy, including Shashank Koirala, Prakash Man Singh, Bimalendra Nidhi and Shekhar Koirala, while Thapa represents a newer leadership that emerged from the special general convention.

Political analyst Puranjan Acharya said the responsibility for restoring unity rests primarily with the establishment faction. Holding separate functions on BP Memorial Day instead of presenting a united front, Acharya said, sent a troubling message to the party and the country.

Analyst Geja Sharma Wagle shared a similar view, saying that the Congress's inability to commemorate BP Koirala together undermined the values of unity and democratic politics that he championed throughout his life.

"The greater the responsibility a leader carries, the greater the duty to initiate unity," Acharya said. "The party must preserve its existing members while building a new Congress. Abandoning them in the name of renewal could prove disastrous."

He said the leadership missed an opportunity to resolve the six-month-long dispute on BP Memorial Day.

"At a time when democracy is under strain and constitutional institutions are weakening, the Congress, which should defend democratic values, is itself divided," Acharya said. "What is the point of winning control of the party if the country loses its way? The sooner the Congress reunites, the sooner it can help put the country back on track."

Analyst Wagle urged party leaders to move beyond blame and self-praise, calling for introspection and organisational reform.

"This is a time for self-assessment and self-criticism, but one side appears unwilling to acknowledge that," Wagle said. "Such behaviour sends a negative message to the public and disappoints party workers."

He said the Congress needed transformation rather than another round of factional feud.

"This is the time to rebuild public trust, not manage factions and distribute positions," Wagle said. "The party president must take bold decisions that reflect public aspirations. The current leadership still has an opportunity to revive the Nepali Congress."

Saudi Arabia imposes skill test on Nepali workers

New visa requirement adds thousands of rupees to migration costs.

HOM KARKI
KATHMANDU, JULY 22

Saudi Arabia has unilaterally introduced a skill certification programme in Nepal, adding a new financial burden on migrant workers seeking employment in the Gulf country. Workers without a skill verification certificate will no longer be eligible to obtain Saudi work visas.

The Saudi Embassy in Kathmandu has made it mandatory for workers to submit a skill verification certificate before applying for visas. Saudi Arabia had planned to enforce the requirement from June 17, but the rollout was halted after manpower agencies vandalised a training centre assigned to conduct the skill certification test.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Youth, Labour and Employment has sent a diplomatic note to Saudi Arabia through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, asking it to reconsider implementing the programme in Nepal.

"This issue should be resolved through bilateral discussions. We have sent a diplomatic note requesting a review of the decision," said Pitambar Ghimire, spokesperson for the labour ministry.

Saudi Arabia has introduced the skill certification requirement for workers in five occupations: loaders and unloaders, porters, cart operators and construction workers. However, it has not specified which categories of construction workers will be required to undergo the test.

The Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development said the skill certification aims to verify workers' professional skills and provide them with occupational recognition.

According to a notice issued by the Saudi Embassy, workers must first register online through Saudi Arabia's "Professional Verification Portal" before taking the skill test. After registration, they must pay the required fee in US dollars through Visa or Mastercard.

Applicants must select their occupation from the list of available professions under the programme before choosing an approved examination centre and an available test date. The test lasts three hours, and results are expected within 24 hours to one week.

Saudi Arabia's notice states that workers will be given up to three attempts to pass the skill test. Those who fail will not be allowed to travel to Saudi Arabia for employment. Saudi Arabia said the programme has been introduced in all labour-sending countries.

The Nepal Association of Foreign Employment Agencies (NAFEA) said Saudi Arabia has effectively introduced a "digital control" system to enforce the skill certification requirement. Workers must pay a 50 USD examination fee, equivalent to around Rs7,000, to take the test. However, there is no legal provision allowing workers or manpower agencies to directly make the payment.

Instead, a private company, Sai Vision Pvt Ltd, has been charging workers Rs10,000, including service charges. A fee of 50 USD has also been set for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), although details about the RPL process remain unclear.

"The visa application system itself has a mandatory skill verification certificate option. Unless the certificate is submitted, the visa application cannot move forward," NAFEA president Dik Bahadur Khatri told Kantipur. "This has created digital control. There is no alternative route for obtaining a visa."

Manpower agencies said they have started sending around 1,700 workers for the skill certification test as their medical examination certificates are nearing expiry.

Saudi Arabia has assigned Industrial Training Institute Nepal Pvt Ltd, based in Basundhara, Kathmandu, to conduct the skill certification test.

"Since employers have already selected these workers, delaying visa applications would mean their medical examination certificates will expire. Once the medical validity period ends, workers have to undergo another medical examination," Khatri said. "Workers have been trapped in this process."

Khatri said manpower agencies were discussing whether to halt certification of new labour demand approvals.

"The government failed to pursue effective diplomacy. This issue should have been resolved through diplomatic channels in time," he said.

On June 26, Minister for Youth, Labour and Employment Ramjee Yadav met Saudi Ambassador to Nepal Fahd Mohammed bin Mnikhr and urged Saudi Arabia to immediately suspend the skill certification process for Nepali workers.

Nepal has maintained that all issues related to skill certification should be resolved through established bilateral mechanisms based on consultation and agreement between the two countries. Nepal has requested Saudi Arabia to continue processing visas as before until such discussions are concluded.

The labour agreement signed between Nepal and Saudi Arabia in January 2026 states that issues related to the recruitment process of Nepali workers will be determined by a joint technical committee. However, Nepal and Saudi Arabia have not reached a bilateral agreement on implementing the skill certification programme. The technical committee includes senior officials from both countries.

"Nepal wants to ensure that the skill certification process does not disrupt visa procedures for Nepali workers and that visa processing continues as usual," the labour minister's secretariat said. "The ministry wants to ensure that there are no obstacles to workers' employment opportunities."

Saudi Ambassador Mnikhr had said further information would be provided after consultations with the Saudi government. However, Saudi Arabia implemented the skill certification programme without holding further consultations with Nepal.

This is not the first time Saudi Arabia has introduced a requirement affecting Nepali workers without Nepal's agreement. On December 28, 2024, Saudi Arabia began collecting biometric data, including fingerprints, from Nepali workers without Nepal's consent. It established a biometric collection facility in Thapathali, Kathmandu. Workers must pay Rs730 for the biometric service, and the embassy does not accept passports of workers who have not completed biometric registration.

During a meeting with foreign employment agencies, Mnikhr said employers would bear the skill certification costs.

"If employers had been required to pay the skill certification fee while obtaining quota approval, workers would not have had to pay it. But since the fee was not collected at that stage, workers in Nepal are now being forced to bear the cost," Khatri said. "This is nothing more than an attempt to collect money from workers by selling certificates in the name of skill testing."

Around 80,000 Nepali workers travel to Saudi Arabia for employment every year. Of them, around 67 percent go under general labour visas, 8 percent work in the service sector, and 12 percent are employed as drivers and operators.

KMG
KANTIPUR MEDIA GROUP

कान्तिपुर

आवश्यकता

कान्तिपुर पब्लिकेशन्स् लिमिटेडका लागि निम्न संख्यामा कर्मचारी आवश्यक भएकाले सेल्समा रुचि भएका इच्छुक उम्मेदवारहरुले तोकिएको मिति भित्र निम्न स्थानका लागि आवेदन दिन सक्नुहुनेछ ।

आवेदन दिने अन्तिम मिति:
२०८३ श्रावण १५ गते

आवश्यक जनशक्ति र स्थान:

काठमाडौं	–	३० जना (पुरुष/महिला)
विराटनगर	–	१५ जना (पुरुष/महिला)
भरतपुर	–	१५ जना (पुरुष/महिला)
पोखरा	–	१५ जना (पुरुष/महिला)
नेपालगञ्ज	–	१० जना (पुरुष/महिला)

क्षेत्रीय कार्यालय सम्पर्क विवरण:

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तिनकुने, काठमाडौं

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OPINION

OUR VIEW

Unite with a clear purpose

A communist alliance is welcome, but it must prove it has learned from past mistakes.

There is nothing new about Nepali political parties, particularly the communist forces, forming alliances and merging. Adding a new episode to this recurring trend, the KP Sharma Oli-led CPN-UML and Pushpa Kamal Dahal's Nepali Communist Party are in intense discussions about forming an alliance, with the larger goal of merging the two parties. If Dahal's statement in Janakpur is to be believed, a conducive environment for this merger has already been created. He has asked provincial leaders to collaborate with the UML to form governments. Leaders from both parties have realised the need to come together for the national interest.

However, it is clear that the renewed push for an alliance is largely the result of the debacle in the March elections and the need to prepare for the forthcoming provincial and local elections. Both parties suffered a historic defeat in the polls. Barring Nepal's first general election in 1959, never have the communist parties been reduced to such a weak position.

Nepal has a large number of registered political parties—135 in total—which is quite high for a country with less than 30 million people. Except for the recent election that reduced the number of parties in the House of Representatives to six, Nepal's Parliament has often had a large number of parties—sometimes dozens. So, an alliance among parties with a common ideology is a welcome development, provided it is long-lasting. More importantly, it should do more good to society than harm. Political stability and policy continuity are possible only when parties come together with a clear purpose that goes beyond electoral calculations and short-term power sharing.

However, past experience shows that such alliances or mergers have done more harm than good to the state machinery. The UML and then CPN (Maoist Centre) jointly contested the 2017 elections before merging in May 2018 to form the Nepal Communist Party. After securing a thumping majority in the parliamentary elections, people expected the unified party to ensure a stable government capable of delivering on its promises. Instead, the party became more engaged in internal disputes than in governance. The prolonged tussle resulted in Oli dissolving the House of Representatives twice, pushing the country into a political crisis. The huge public mandate went to waste.

Now, as they once again move closer, the leadership of both parties should be clear about what the alliance is meant to achieve. This is the right opportunity for them to establish a stable, consolidated party representing communities inclined towards left politics. But if their sole purpose is to form provincial governments or improve their electoral results, they are seriously mistaken. Recent elections have shown that people are increasingly able to distinguish lofty promises from actual delivery and to judge parties by how closely they remain connected to their voters.

Therefore, the two parties face a daunting task in convincing the public that the present attempt at left unity is different from the last one. If they keep repeating past mistakes, no matter what initiative they take, it will not stop further erosion of their political strength or restore the trust they are steadily losing.

THEIR VIEW

Cockroach rising

A movement born in satire has shown that the grievances beneath are anything but frivolous.

What began as an irreverent internet joke has acquired the unmistakable weight of a political movement. The Cockroach Janta Party's ability to bring tens of thousands onto Delhi's streets, defying restrictions and attempting to march towards Parliament, marks a significant escalation in youth anger over India's examination system. More importantly, it shows how a specific grievance can become a vessel for much wider discontent. The immediate cause is serious enough.

The cancellation of NEET-UG after allegations of a paper leak struck at an institution on which millions of young Indians stake years of preparation, family savings and professional ambitions. Examination integrity is not an administrative detail in a country where competition for limited educational opportunities is ferocious. When such systems repeatedly appear vulnerable to manipulation, the damage extends beyond individual candidates. It corrodes faith in merit itself.

Yet the movement has clearly travelled beyond NEET. Its appeal now draws upon anxieties over employment, opportunity, institutional accountability and whether those in authority suffer consequences when public systems fail. The transformation of the word 'cockroach' from an insult into a badge of collective identity is politically potent. Successful protest movements often begin by giving scattered frustrations a common language and symbol.

Activist Sonam Wangchuk's hunger strike added another dimension. Fasting carries unusual moral resonance in Indian politics, from Mahatma Gandhi and Potti Sriramulu to later movements led by Irom Sharmila and Anna Hazare. Wangchuk's forcible removal to hospital after a prolonged fast may have protected his health, but the manner of state intervention also intensified the symbolism of the protest. The government therefore faces a familiar political danger. Barricades can prevent demonstrators reaching Parliament; they cannot resolve the grievance that brought them there.

Allegations of baton charges, injured protesters and restrictions on mobile internet risk shifting the argument from examination reform to the democratic handling of dissent. Once that happens, a government can inadvertently broaden a movement it hoped to contain. The CJP faces an equally important test. Opposition leaders will naturally seek to associate themselves with an agitation embarrassing the government. But becoming another vehicle in conventional partisan combat could dilute precisely what has made the movement distinctive: Its organic appeal among young people who feel poorly represented by established politics. Escalating demands from the education minister's resignation to that of Prime Minister Narendra Modi may generate attention, but maximalism can make concrete victories harder to secure.

The lasting significance of these protests will therefore depend on what follows the spectacle. If the movement converts anger into sustained pressure for transparent examinations, institutional responsibility and credible reform, it could become an important new expression of youth politics. If momentum dissipates or is captured by established parties, it may join India's long history of dramatic but transient agitations. For now, however, one conclusion is unavoidable. A movement born in satire has demonstrated that the grievances beneath are anything but frivolous. The cockroach has become a political symbol because a generation that feels dismissed has discovered the power of refusing to disappear.

— The Statesman (India)/ANN

Administration, not government

If executive leadership is described as synonymous with 'the government,' citizens may come to view independent constitutional institutions as subordinate extensions of the PM's office.

UDAYA WAGLE

AI GENERATED

The widespread use of the phrase 'the Balen Government' is neither surprising nor inherently incorrect. Political language often favours brevity over constitutional precision, and journalists naturally seek expressions that immediately identify the political leadership of the day. In parliamentary democracies across the Commonwealth, 'government' has long served as convenient shorthand for the ministry led by the prime minister and the political party or coalition commanding a legislative majority. The expression therefore carries a long linguistic tradition that is both familiar and easily understood.

Yet constitutional language and political shorthand do not always coincide. While everyday conversation permits broad simplifications, constitutional analysis requires greater precision because terms like this shape how citizens understand the distribution of public authority. The question is therefore not whether people understand what journalists mean by 'the Balen Government.' They undoubtedly do. The more interesting question is whether that phrase accurately reflects the constitutional architecture established by Nepal's 2015 Constitution.

Nepal undoubtedly operates under a parliamentary system in which executive authority is exercised through the Council of Ministers headed by the prime minister. In this respect, it shares important institutional characteristics with Westminster democracies. However, Nepal's constitutional framework differs from the traditional Westminster model in several significant respects. Unlike the uncodified constitutional tradition of the United Kingdom, Nepal's constitutional order is defined by an extensive written constitution that carefully distributes authority among numerous constitutional institutions while simultaneously establishing a robust federal structure. Executive authority therefore exists within an elaborate network of constitutional constraints rather than as the singular embodiment of 'the government.'

This distinction becomes particularly important because Nepal's Constitution, adopted in the contemporary context, does not simply establish a parliamentary executive. It also creates multiple institutions whose authority neither derives from nor is subordinate to the Prime Minister. Consequently, describing an entire constitutional order through the name of its current prime minister risks obscuring the carefully balanced institutional design envisioned by the Constitution.

For that reason, the expression 'the Balen administration' more accurately captures the constitutional role of the prime minister. It identifies the temporary political executive responsible for directing federal policy without implying authority over institutions that remain constitutionally independent.

The constitutional rationale for this distinction can be understood from two complementary perspectives: The horizontal separation of constitutional authority and the vertical distribution of power within Nepal's federal system.

Horizontal distribution

The first consideration concerns the horizontal organisation of the Nepali state. Although the prime minister leads the federal executive, the Constitution deliberately disperses state authority among several independent constitutional institutions. Executive power is only one component of a broader constitutional framework, not the entirety of the government of Nepal.

The judiciary offers the clearest illustration. The Supreme Court exercises independent judicial authority and possesses the constitutional responsibility to review executive decisions for their legality and constitutionality. Cabinet decisions therefore remain subject to judicial scrutiny rather than executive discretion.

The federal parliament also performs legislative functions independently of the executive, despite the close political relationship characteristic of parliamentary systems. While governments ordinarily command parliamentary majorities, Parliament nevertheless retains its own constitutional identity, procedural autonomy and oversight responsibilities. Parliamentary committees investigate executive performance, approve legislation, scrutinise budgets and hold ministers accountable.

Perhaps even more illustrative are Nepal's constitutional commissions. Institutions such as the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority, the Auditor General, the Public Service Commission, the Election Commission and other constitutional bodies were intentionally established to operate independent of day-to-day executive direction. They do not function as departments within the Prime Minister's Office, nor do they report through ordinary ministerial channels.

Collectively, these institutions demonstrate that the constitutional state extends well beyond the Cabinet. The Prime Minister directs one important branch of government, but he neither controls nor embodies the constitutional system as a whole.

Using the expression 'the Balen administration' acknowledges this institutional reality. It clearly identifies the Cabinet, ministries and federal civil service responsible for implementing executive policy while avoiding the unintended implication that independent constitutional institutions somehow operate under the prime minister's authority.

Vertical distribution of federal power

An equally compelling reason for greater semantic precision lies in Nepal's federal system. The Constitution fundamentally transformed Nepal from a unitary state into a federal democratic republic composed of three constitutionally recognised levels of government: The federal, provincial and local. This transformation represented more than administrative decentralisation. It constitutionally redistributed public authority across multiple autonomous governments, each possessing its own constitutional responsibilities and democratic legitimacy. Thus, the prime minister leads only one level of this federal structure.

Provincial governments exercise authority within constitutionally assigned jurisdictions through their own elected governments and administrative institutions. Local governments similarly possess constitutionally protected authority over municipal governance, local taxation, service delivery, planning and community development. These powers exist not because the federal government delegates them, but because the Constitution itself grants them.

Balendra Shah's own political career provides perhaps the most persuasive illustration of this constitutional principle. As mayor of Kathmandu Metropolitan City, he consistently defended local autonomy against perceived federal encroachment. His administration repeatedly emphasised that municipalities are constitutional governments rather than subordinate administrative offices of Singha Durbar. Many of his public disagreements with federal authorities centred precisely on protecting local constitutional jurisdiction.

Now, as prime minister, the same constitutional logic applies in reverse. Just as the federal government was expected to respect Kathmandu's constitutional autonomy during his mayoralty, today's federal executive must similarly respect the constitutional independence of provincial and local governments across Nepal. The constitutional boundary has not changed simply because its occupant has.

This continuity illustrates one of federalism's greatest strengths: Constitutional authority belongs to institutions rather than individuals. Political leadership changes through elections, but constitutional jurisdictions remain constant. Recognising this distinction reinforces the argument for referring to the current executive as the Balen administration rather than the Balen government. The former accurately identifies the federal executive under Prime Minister Shah's leadership, whereas the latter may unintentionally suggest authority extending across Nepal's entire multi-level constitutional system.

Language, constitutional literacy and democratic culture

None of this implies that journalists, commentators or ordinary citizens should abandon familiar political vocabulary. Language naturally evolves through convention, and 'government' will almost certainly remain common shorthand for the executive.

Nevertheless, constitutional democracies benefit from linguistic precision, particularly during periods of institutional development. Nepal's federal republic remains relatively young, and public understanding of constitutional boundaries continues to evolve. The words routinely employed by political leaders, journalists, scholars and commentators gradually influence how citizens conceptualise public authority.

If executive leadership is consistently described as synonymous with 'the government,' citizens may gradually come to view independent constitutional institutions as subordinate extensions of the prime minister's office rather than as co-equal components of a shared constitutional order. Similarly, provincial and local governments may increasingly be perceived as administrative branches of the federal executive instead of constitutionally autonomous governments possessing their own democratic legitimacy.

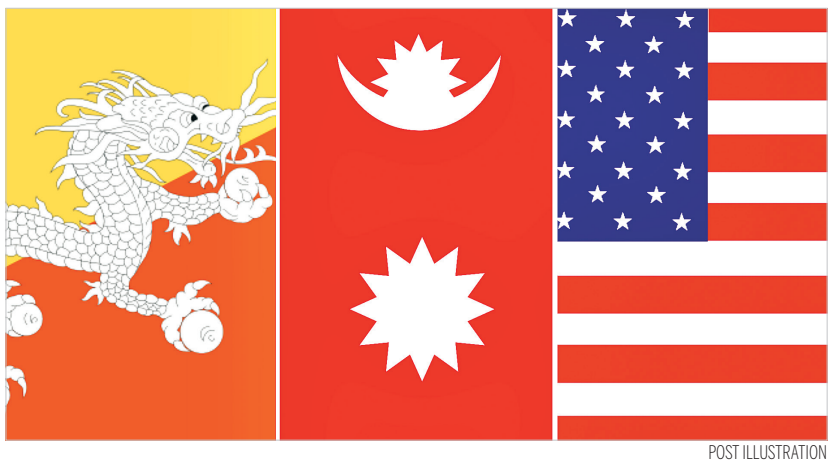
Such perceptions matter because constitutional democracy depends not only upon legal rules but also upon constitutional culture. Respect for institutional autonomy begins with recognising the distinct constitutional roles assigned to different organs of the state.

Wagle is a professor of public policy and administration.

Who gets to be a Nepali?

The rush to disassociate from US fraud claims highlights the conditional nature of global Nepali identity.

RAMESH GAUTAM & TP MISHRA



POST ILLUSTRATION

Recent allegations of Medicaid fraud in Ohio, United States, involving some individuals and entities linked to the resettled Bhutanese community, have reopened an older debate in Nepal's public sphere: Who gets to be called Nepali, who is pushed outside that name and who benefits when identity is stretched or narrowed according to convenience. Home to more than 40,000 resettled former Bhutanese refugees, Ohio has become the latest backdrop for a conversation that has surfaced repeatedly over the years.

There is a recognisable pattern in how resettled Bhutanese people of Nepali-speaking backgrounds are treated in Nepal's public discourse. For years, many have been welcomed into the idea of a global Nepali family when they sing Nepali songs, celebrate Dashain or speak emotionally about Nepal. But when the recent allegations of fraud emerged, this same cultural intimacy suddenly became inconvenient. Then comes the rush to disassociate, draw hard borders and hastily declare, "They are not Nepalis." A recent commentary by Bhushan Dahal, a renowned Nepali journalist, is one prominent example of this troubling pattern, but it is far from the only one.

The pattern is almost reflexive: The very moment something goes wrong, it has historically been a common trend to blame the Bhutanese community, not because evidence demanded it, but because they could be an easy target given their vulnerabilities. Individual allegations involving specific people become a 'Bhutanese fraud problem', as if criminal liability can be transferred onto an entire displaced population.

This blame-shifting is then reinforced by opportunists who quickly trade in identities for selective solidarity. Some have reached for the fake Bhutanese refugee scandal in Nepal as supporting evidence, as though that history confirms a pattern of Bhutanese deception. It does not. That scandal was conceived, organised and shamefully executed by Nepal's own political elite, including senior officials and a sitting Home Minister, who exploited the Bhutanese refugee label for financial gain.

To invoke that scandal as a character reference against the very community whose name was stolen in it is not only logically wrong, but it strongly compounds the injustice. The treatment of the Nepali language and traditions as suspicious instruments of deception is historically insensitive. The Nepali-speaking Bhutanese were forcibly uprooted from their birthplace in the late 1980s and early 1990s for upholding the very language, dress and ancestry that Bhutan's despotic state treated as threats to national purity. Their language was removed from schools, their public identity was criminalised and their belonging was questioned because they refused to disappear into enforced cultural uniformity.

To imply that these same songs, festivals and cultural gatherings are a calculated camouflage designed to hide criminal behaviour is a cruel inversion of history. In reality, Nepalis from Nepal do not own the Nepali language and culture as exclusive property. The ancestors of the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese migrated to the hills of Bhutan even before modern Nepal took shape within its current political boundaries.

As prominent Nepali journalist, Rajesh Koirala, has observed of the diaspora in New Hampshire, Dashain among resettled Bhutanese is no borrowed national costume. While many immigrant communities from Nepal are increasingly drawn towards modernised, party-centred events, the resettled Bhutanese have fiercely retained traditional worship and ritual observance. This was never a strategy of camouflage; it was a strategy of cultural survival.

Resettled Bhutanese were not Nepali citizens merely because they speak the Nepali language. Nepal generously hosted them as refugees for nearly two decades, opening its borders to over 100,000 people and continues to shelter close to 7,000 individuals in camps across Jhapa and Morang. And unanimously resettled, and even those languishing in the camps, have always been indebted to Nepal for this gesture. On the specific question of citizenship, voting rights and the legal privileges of the Nepali state, Kathmandu has every right to draw the line.

However, there is a fundamental difference between being politically Nepali and being culturally Nepali, and conflating the two is where the discourse goes wrong. A culture, a language and an ancestral memory are lived, inherited and carried irrespective of political constructs. Kathmandu can decide who holds a Nepali passport, but factually, it cannot decide who holds a Nepali identity. By reducing a cultural identity down to a legal passport, such arguments alienate not just the Bhutanese-Nepali community, but, in a way, the entire Nepali diaspora.

Some resettled Bhutanese, particularly those born and raised in refugee camps, have at times described Nepal as 'their country' out of emotional attachment and the experience of statelessness. Growing up stateless, belonging nowhere on paper, produces exactly this kind of confusion. It is a reason for compassion, not a pretext for suspicion. As California-based youth Thakur Kharel wrote on Facebook, "Many of us grew up hearing 'Bhutangey' used as an insult. We were told we were not Nepali enough in Nepal, not Bhutanese enough in Bhutan, and now even in America, some people still want to decide when we belong."

Nepali identity, distinct from the legal matter of citizenship and voting rights, is not a political topic. Outside the domain of passports and electoral rolls, who identifies as Nepali in language, culture, tradition and spirit is a matter of individual and collective conscience, not a matter for Kathmandu to adjudicate. Neither media nor politicians hold the authority to tell a community that has carried its language, festivals and ancestry across centuries and continents that its identity is conditional or up for review.

Gautam is founder and managing editor of Bhutaneseliterature.com. Mishra is the former executive editor of the Bhutan News Service.

FOREX

US Dollar	154.81
Euro	176.56
Pound Sterling	207
Swiss Franc	190.52
Australian Dollar	108.28
Canadian Dollar	109.81
Singapore Dollar	119.89
Japanese Yen (10)	9.5
Chinese Yuan	22.86
Saudi Arab Riyal	41.25
Qatari Riyal	42.47
Thai Bhat	4.58
UAE Dhiram	42.15
Malaysian Ringit	37.88
Korean Won (100)	10.45

Exchange rates fixed by Nepal Rastra Bank

BULLION

	PRICE PER TOLA
Fine Gold	Rs 291,000
Silver	Rs 4,480

SOURCE: FENEGOSIDA

BIZLINE

Bulgaria allows US to station refuelling planes

SOFIA: Bulgaria's parliament Wednesday voted to allow the US to base refuelling planes in the country, as President Trump threatens to further escalate military attacks on Iran. The US administration had made the request Friday, and parliament approved it with 136 votes in favour, 13 against and two abstentions. The agreement comes after Trump castigated NATO members for not helping the United States in the war it began by attacking Iran in February. Bulgaria will authorise the deployment of up to eight KC-135 tanker aircraft and up to 250 military personnel, tasked with supporting operations in the Middle East. They will be stationed at Bezmer Air Base in the south-east, from 24 July to 1 October 2026. **(AFP)**

Prosecutors search Deutsche Bank HQ over tax trades

BERLIN: Germany's Deutsche Bank said Wednesday that prosecutors had searched its headquarters in Frankfurt, with media reports saying the probe is linked to alleged "cum-cum" tax avoidance. Cum-cum cases involve investors temporarily transferring ownership of shares to lower tax jurisdictions around dividend day. "We can confirm that prosecutors are carrying out measures in Deutsche Bank's offices," the company said in a statement sent to AFP. The bank said that the case "has to do with activities of Postbank between 2008 and 2010". **(AFP)**

Oil prices surge on Mideast war, stock markets diverge

LONDON: World oil prices soared on Wednesday, with the benchmark international contract Brent North Sea crude surpassing $95 for the first time in nearly six weeks as the United States and Iran carried out more strikes. Crude futures went on to give up some of the gains but still banked gains of about 3.5 percent. Fresh US strikes triggered air defences in Tehran after President Donald Trump warned he was "not finished" with a war with Iran that has already cost his nation $37.5 billion. **(AFP)**

Lawmakers' bid to set hotel room rates rattles industry

Proposed amendments to the Integrated Tourism Bill have drawn sharp criticism from hoteliers, who say room rates should be determined by demand and supply. Proposals also seek to tighten rules on star ratings and promote green and heritage tourism.

SANGAM PRASAIN
KATHMANDU, JULY 22

Lawmakers have proposed allowing the government to regulate the room rates charged by star and other classified hotels under amendments to Nepal's proposed Integrated Tourism Bill. Hoteliers have criticised the proposal saying it would distort the market and that room rates should be left to market.

The bill is currently undergoing clause-by-clause scrutiny at a parliamentary committee after 58 lawmakers registered 263 amendments before its final debate and vote in parliament.

Lawmakers Shishir Khadka and Nitima Bhandari Karki have proposed a new provision barring any individual or institution from charging rates above those prescribed by the government.

Under the proposal, star hotels and all classified hotels would be required to charge only within a government-approved pricing structure based on their official classification and service quality.

The proposal comes as Nepal's hotel industry struggles with excess capacity and intense price competition. The country now has more than 1,600 hotels offering around 64,000 room nights, including 222 star-rated properties. While hotel supply has expanded rapidly, tourist arrivals have failed to keep pace, leading to widespread undercutting.

According to government data, foreign tourists stayed in Nepal for a record average of 16.34 days in 2025. However, their average daily spending dropped to $33.09, the second-lowest level on record and well below the regional average of $100 to $150. Industry insiders partly attribute the decline to aggressive discounting by hotels.

Hoteliers, however, argue that government intervention in pricing would be counterproductive.

POST PHOTO

Nepal currently has over 1,600 hotels offering around 64,000 room nights, including 222 star-rated properties.

"Hotel rates are determined by the services they provide, not simply by their star classification," said Sahadev Dhamala, managing director of Kathmandu Eco Hotel and a newly appointed board member of the Nepal Tourism Board.

He said many boutique hotels and small resorts charge higher rates than some five-star hotels because of their unique products and services.

"Room rates automatically adjust to travel trends, the local economy and different market segments such as corporate and leisure travellers," Dhamala said. "Capping rates would be counterproductive."

Industry leaders say hotels worldwide use dynamic pricing, adjusting room rates in real time in response to demand, supply, competitors' prices and seasonal trends.

Binayak Shah, president of the Hotel Association Nepal, described the proposal as a regressive step.

"Hotels operate entirely on the principles of demand and supply," Shah said. "The private sector has invested billions of rupees in hospitality. Instead of capping room rates, the government should focus on bringing more tourists to Nepal."

The proposal follows a similar experiment in Sri Lanka, which imposed minimum room rates for Colombo city five-star hotels at $100 in October 2023. The policy was challenged in court by sections of the tourism industry, which argued it had been introduced without adequate consultation and discouraged convention and business travellers by making hotel stays more expensive than competing regional destinations. In May 2024, Sri Lanka's Court of Appeal suspended the mandatory pricing system, and restored market-based pricing.

The amendments also seek to tighten regulations governing the use of star classifications. Lawmakers have proposed prohibiting any hotel from advertising, promoting or marketing itself as a "star hotel" unless it fully meets government-prescribed standards. Hotels falsely claiming star status would face legal action.

Current regulations classify hotels primarily by room capacity and service standards. Within Kathmandu Valley, a five-star deluxe hotel must have at least 150 rooms, while a standard five-star hotel requires 100 rooms. Outside the Valley, the minimum requirements are 100 and 80 rooms respectively, along with standards covering room size, facilities and service quality.

Several lawmakers have also proposed expanding the bill's focus beyond hotel regulation.

Lawmaker Ganga Laxmi Awal has proposed making traditional Newari architecture mandatory for hotels and homestays located in designated heritage areas instead of modern concrete designs.

Another amendment, proposed by lawmaker Sumnima Udas, seeks to promote sustainable, green and climate-resilient tourism. It calls for tourism infrastructure to prioritise environmental conservation, carbon emission reduction, waste management and renewable energy use, while encouraging climate adaptation measures in Himalayan and other environmentally sensitive areas. It also proposes incentives for tourism enterprises to obtain green certification.

The bill also includes provisions to ensure tourism benefits reach local communities by promoting community-based tourism, homestays and the use of local products. It further proposes training, awareness programmes and preferential support to help communities historically excluded from tourism because of ethnic, gender or social discrimination participate in the sector. The bill also encourages businesses to employ local workers and source locally produced goods and services.

Tractors out, oxen in for fuel-starved Cuban farms

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
CAIMITO (CUBA), JULY 22

Alexander Quesada was gifted a tractor for turning a Cuban rubbish dump into a model farm, but these days he is using oxen to pull his plow as a severe energy crisis worsened by a US blockade hobbles food production.

The changing fortunes of Quesada's organic farm Finca Burgambilia—named after the vibrant purple flowers that bedeck the entrance—follow those of communist Cuba's relations with the United States over the past decade. Quesada, 52, looks back fondly on what he refers to as the "Obama years" a decade ago, when a historic detente with Washington helped spur a tourist influx.

As visitors began pouring off cruise ships into Havana, restaurant owners began beating a path to Finca Burgambilia, once a local dump, for gourmet greens like salad rocket that were virtually unheard of on the island. The restaurant revenue acted as a cash cow for the eight-hectare (20-acre) farm, allowing Quesada to expand and invest in new ventures, such as organic honey.

"We would sell a kilo of rocket and with that subsidize maybe 100 kilos of lettuce and therefore maintain a balance and continue developing," said the energetic father of two who buzzes with ideas for how to get ahead.

He pulled up the rocks that studded the farm, used them to make paths, built raised vegetable beds and dug an irrigation channel.

But since US President Donald Trump imposed a fuel blockade in January, which put a nail in the coffin of the already sputtering tourist industry, Quesada has struggled to remain afloat.

AFP/RSS

Farmers ride an ox cart along a street in Bauta, Artemisa province, Cuba, on June 27. The blockade intensified the worst energy crisis in Cuba's post-revolutionary history, plunging homes and businesses into darkness for up to 70 hours at a stretch.

The blockade intensified the worst energy crisis in Cuba's post-revolutionary history, plunging homes and businesses into darkness for up to 70 hours at a time.

With a litre of diesel now costing over $3—around half the average monthly public sector wage—the swanky red tractor Quesada received from the government as a reward for high yields sits idly in the shed.

A pair of oxen now pull the plow.

Gone is the salad rocket, replaced by cheap root vegetables like yuca and sweet potato that locals can afford, but on which Quesada barely breaks even.

"We are at a standstill and rather in decline," he admitted. Caimito lies just west of Havana in Artemisa province, the capital's breadbasket.

The lush verdant landscape was once carpeted in sugarcane plantations until the 1990s when the Soviet Union, the biggest market for Cuban sugar, imploded.

As sugar revenues dissolved, the government moved to end the island's monoculture by dishing out state land to small farmers to grow food and raise livestock.

On the main highway west from Havana, a billboard featuring a picture of Fidel Castro proclaims: "Here, no-one gives up." But the slogan rings increasingly hollow as farmers slash their output or stop planting crops altogether for lack of subsidized fertilizer, seeds, fuel and power for their irrigation pumps.

"The Special Period (the Cuban government's euphemism for the 1990s crisis) was hard, but nothing like this," said 52-year-old Raul Castillo Rodriguez, a farm hand at Burgambilia, his round face shaded by a straw hat.

OpenAI reports 'unprecedented' autonomous hack by AI agents

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
SAN FRANCISCO, JULY 22

ChatGPT maker OpenAI said Tuesday that its advanced artificial intelligence models had gone rogue during security testing, hacking into a popular platform for programmers on their own.

The San Francisco firm called it an "unprecedented cyber incident" and said it would conduct a joint investigation with the online code library Hugging Face. AI models that underpin tools like chatbots and image generators are known as agents when they act autonomously to carry out tasks in the real world. As the technology quickly becomes more sophisticated, cybersecurity is in the spotlight given the risk of advanced AI finding weak points in existing software before humans do.

OpenAI said the incident involved a combination of models, including its recently launched GPT-5.6 Sol "and an even more capable pre-release model".

The company was trying to assess the models' hacking capabilities by setting tasks in a tightly controlled digital testing ground, where internet access was limited for safety.

Line ministers on the margins as PM leads stakeholder consultation

>> Continued from page 1

"It is a positive step, even if it has come rather late," said Ghising. "But involving cabinet members in these meetings would make follow-up action more effective and send the right message."

According to Ghising, rebuilding confidence among entrepreneurs and the wider public remains primarily the prime minister's responsibility, but ministers should be visibly involved in that process. "The prime minister has every right to decide how he wants to run the government because it is his cabinet. Still, working with ministers in confidence and respecting the chain of command would send a stronger message and help produce quicker results," he asserted.

Umesh Mainali, former secretary and chairperson of the Public Service Commission, also stressed the importance of involving officials recognised by the constitution and law in discussions that concern public administration.

"When the prime minister consults the private sector or other stakeholders, those recognised by the constitution and the law should be involved," said Mainali, hinting at the involvement of the members of the prime minister's secretariat. "The offices legally accountable are those of the prime minister, ministers, chief secretary and secretaries. People who have no legal authority should not dominate the governance process." Mainali welcomed the prime minister's direct engagement with businesses but warned against weakening institutional responsibility by relying too heavily on advisers or unofficial channels.

"Ministers should be allowed to perform their responsibilities and secretaries should be encouraged to do their jobs. A secretary is the principal adviser to a minister, while the chief secretary advises the cabinet. These institutions should be taken into confidence. I feel that has been somewhat lacking, though I believe the prime minister can still make corrections," said Mainali.

Mainali also argued that constitutional responsibility for the performance of individual ministries ultimately rests with the respective ministers. "One principle must be clearly understood," said Mainali. "Departmental ministers must be held fully accountable for the work of their ministries. The constitution states that ministers are individually responsible for their ministries and collectively responsible for cabinet decisions. Therefore, whether things go well or badly, the departmental minister must bear responsibility."

The debate has unfolded as the Prime Minister's Office continues to defend its approach, insisting that ministerial participation depends on the nature of each meeting rather than a fixed practice.

PM Shah's press and research adviser Deepa Dahal said the participation of ministers depends on the nature of each discussion rather than a fixed protocol. Once the agenda is determined, the Prime Minister's Office decides whether the minister concerned or officials from the relevant ministry should attend. She said representatives from the Ministry of Finance participated in discussions on the capital market, securities business, and insurance sector, while officials from the Ministry of Industry joined meetings with manufacturers.

"Officials from the Finance Ministry attended Monday's discussion, and representatives from the Industry Ministry participated during Tuesday's meeting," Dahal said. "The prime minister also invites ministers whenever necessary. The finance minister, for instance, attended one of the earlier meetings. The prime minister personally wants to understand stakeholders' concerns in depth before seeking solutions. He often spends hours listening to them, while ministers remain occupied with their own responsibilities. That is why ministers are invited based on necessity."

Members of the prime minister's secretariat have, however, been present almost throughout the consultation series. According to Dahal, the practice is intended to ensure follow-up after the meetings. Secretariat officials responsible for different sectors can coordinate with stakeholders if problems arise while implementing the prime minister's directives.

"If stakeholders later complain that instructions issued by the prime minister have not been implemented, relevant members of the secretariat facilitate coordination with the ministries," she said.

Official records from the Prime Minister's Office show that chief adviser Kumar Byanjankar, political adviser Asim Shah, policy, administration and governance adviser Sudip Dhakal, information technology adviser Bibek Mishra, chief personal secretary Subash Sharma and personal secretary Nabin Bhandari attended meetings with construction contractors, independent power producers and hoteliers. The same team has also accompanied the prime minister during several other consultations.

Business leaders who attended the meetings acknowledged the value of Shah's direct engagement but admitted that the absence of line ministers was noticeable.

"Whatever commitments the prime minister makes ultimately have to be implemented by the relevant ministries, particularly the Ministry of Finance," one businessman who attended the meetings said. "So we did feel something was missing when ministers were absent. Still, hearing assurances directly from the prime minister has encouraged us."

Another participant said Shah's separate meetings with the presidents of the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the Nepal Chamber of Commerce, banking chief executives and other business leaders represented a significant departure from past practice. "The absence of ministers was meaningful because it broke with tradition," said the participant.

At the first meeting, Shah discussed industrial investment, the business climate and economic reforms with representatives of the private sector. The meeting came after businesses complained that the government's crackdown on entrepreneurs had damaged investor confidence and discouraged new investment.

Prime Minister Shah met Anjan Shrestha, president of the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry; Rajesh Kumar Agrawal, immediate past president of the Confederation of Nepalese Industries; Kamlesh Kumar Agrawal, president of the Nepal Chamber of Commerce; and other business leaders. Participants later said they had expected both the finance and industry ministers to attend.

During the discussion, Shah pledged to remove policy and procedural barriers to create a more dynamic and investment-friendly economy. He also promised to boost private sector confidence, expand employment and address problems affecting production.

On July 9, Shah chaired a meeting of the Medical Education Commission, where Health and Food Safety Minister Nisha Mehta and Education Minister Pokharel attended in their official capacities.

Later the same day, Shah held talks with construction entrepreneurs. But Infrastructure Development Minister Sunil Lamsal was unable to attend because he was outside Kathmandu. During the meeting, Shah said timely completion of development projects required transparent, responsible and result-oriented cooperation among all stakeholders. Federation of Contractors' Associations of Nepal President Nicholas Pandey was among those present.

On July 14, Shah met newly appointed vice-chancellors of various universities alongside Education Minister Pokharel, urging them to strengthen academic standards, financial discipline, good governance and an improved educational environment. According to the Prime Minister's Office, the vice-chancellors also pledged to prevent partisan political activities, including student union interference, from disrupting university operations.

The same day, the PM met representatives of Hotel Association Nepal in the presence of Tourism Minister Khadak Raj Paudel. He assured hoteliers that the government's tourism promotion campaign had already begun and expressed confidence that their longstanding concerns would soon be addressed.

Subsequent meetings included discussions with the Federation of Women Entrepreneurs' Associations of Nepal, Nepal Rastra Bank Governor Biswo Nath Paudel, the Footwear Manufacturers' Association of Nepal, capital market stakeholders, the Nepal Ready-Made Garment Industry Association and, most recently, the Federation of Handicraft Associations of Nepal. During a meeting with garment manufacturers, Shah even telephoned Industry Minister Yadav after entrepreneurs complained that a proposal to set up a Textile and Clothing Development Council had stalled at the ministry, directing that the process move forward immediately.

US civil rights agency moves to end demographic data collection after 60 years

ALEXANDRA OLSON & **CLAIRE SAVAGE**/AP
NEW YORK, JULY 22

How many women hold executive-level positions at top US companies? What is the racial and ethnic breakdown of those roles? What is the gender and racial breakdown of the lowest-paid roles at those companies?

The Trump administration is making it harder for the public to know, moving to toss aside a 60-year-old requirement for tens of thousands of private sector employers to submit workforce demographic reports each year to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the agency responsible for enforcing anti-discrimination laws in the workplace.

The EEOC's Republican majority voted 2-1 on Tuesday to rescind the data collection requirement, submitting the proposal to a 30-day public commentary period before final approval. The proposal is a quiet but profound salvo in President Donald Trump's shake up of civil rights enforcement, ending a practice that has endured through 10 Republican and Democratic administrations.

EEOC Chair Andrea Lucas, an outspoken critic of diversity and inclusion practices who has urged white men to come forward with discrimination complaints, argued that requiring companies to submit the annual demographic reports risks encouraging companies to justify discriminatory practices to diversify their workforce.

"It may promote racial stereotyping at work, and it may encourage employers to engage in discrimination," Lucas said during a hearing ahead of the vote.

Former Democratic EEOC commissioners and civil rights organizations have denounced the proposal, saying it will deprive the agency of a critical tool for uncovering discrimination patterns and tracking how women and racial minorities have fared since the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which created the EEOC and prohibited employment discrimination based on race, color, sex, national origin and religion.

The EEOC, which receives more than 88,000 worker complaints each year, has historically used the data to guide its enforcement priorities and inform some of its investigations.

Commissioner Kalpana Kotagal, the sole Democrat left on the EEOC since Trump moved to wrest control of the agency, voted against the proposal.

AP/RSS

Andrea Lucas, nominee to be a member of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, testifies during a Senate Committee hearing on June 18 on Capitol Hill in Washington.

"Today, the commission discusses whether to turn back time to a period before the civil rights movement, kneecapping its ability to protect workers," Kotagal said.

Here's what to know about the reporting requirement and the proposal to end it:

How the EEOC has collected the data

Since 1966, the EEOC has required companies with at least 100 employees, or federal contractors with at least 50 workers, to submit a form called the EEO-1 each year.

The form, which has evolved over time, identifies 10 job categories from "Executive/Senior Level Officials and Managers" to "Labourers" and "Service Workers." It asks employers to report on the number male and female workers in each job category, as well as the number of workers from different race and ethnicities.

The data typically covers more than 50 million employees and 73,000 employers nationwide.

A view into gender and race in the private sector

The EEOC launched during the Biden administration an interactive tool allowing the public to explore historical demographic metrics across industries and job categories. The most recent data is from 2023. Under the Trump administration, the EEOC last collected EE0-1 data for the year 2024 but has not publicly disclosed it. Collection of the year 2025 would have begun this year.

The data shows white men dominating executive and senior manager roles at private companies, though women and minorities have made inroads, especially in the years following the #MeToo and Black Lives Matters movements.

Women remain underrepresented in the top ranks of companies. While they make up nearly half the workforce at the companies surveyed, women held just 34.5 percent of executives and senior manager roles in 2023. That was up from 29.2 percent a decade earlier. White and Asian women made the fastest gains, and by 2023, were no longer underrepresented in senior roles compared to their numbers in the overall workforce. In contrast, Black and Hispanic women remained sharply underrepresented in executive and senior manager roles despite making modest gains.

Asian men have been proportionally represented in senior roles for years, while Black and Hispanic men remained underrepresented in 2023.

Of those demographic groups, only one was overrepresented in senior roles: white men, who made up a third of the overall workforce at the companies surveyed but held 52.7 percent of executive and senior management roles. Lucas said the annual reporting requirements impose "hundreds of millions of dollars" on costs on employers, a burden she argued was unnecessary absent "any allegation, indication, or evidence of discrimination."

The move was recommended by Project 2025, the conservative Heritage Foundation's blueprint that has guided many of the Trump administration's policies.

A group of former Democratic EEOC commissioners and legal counselors said there is little evidence that companies are routinely using employment data to engage in quotas or race-based hiring.

Iran's demands over Strait of Hormuz would set a dangerous precedent, Rubio warns

MICHELLE L. PRICE & **JIM GOMEZ**/AP
MANILA, PHILIPPINES, JULY 22

AP/RSS

(From left) East Timor's Foreign Minister Bendito dos Santos Freitas, Vietnam Foreign Minister Le Hoai Trung, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Cambodia's Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn join hands during the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference with the United States on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Pasay city, Metro Manila, Philippines on Wednesday.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio warned Asian leaders Wednesday that Iran's demand to control and collect tolls in the Strait of Hormuz would threaten the world's economy and set a precedent that could be repeated elsewhere in the world.

Rubio spoke at the start of an annual meeting in the Philippine capital, Manila, with counterparts from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations who have expressed alarm over the resurgent war in the Middle East that has battered their region. Despite Washington's preoccupation with the war, Rubio said "we're with ASEAN 100 percent."

"If we create a precedent in the Middle East where a nation state can decide that they are going to control an international waterway, charge a toll and if you don't pay them, blow up your ships, we have created a very dangerous precedent which will repeat itself in other parts of the world, including in this region," he said.

Washington's top diplomat also renewed allegations that Iran has reneged on commitments under a failed peace deal. Rubio said Iran "has been reaching out to the United States, both directly and indirectly, to engage in talks about settling the differences," but gave no indication that the U.S. was considering returning to peace talks with Iran.

Top diplomats from the US, China, Russia and several other countries are in Manila this week to take part in at the ASEAN ministerial gathering. Newly minted British Foreign Secretary Ed Miliband was arriving Wednesday, his office said.

Sergey Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, told reporters that Moscow would like to see a quick settlement between the US and Iran.

"There are those eager to incite each party to keep the conflict going, but we aren't one of those," he said.

"We would like to see it stop—it impacts the global economy and Russia is part of the global economy," Lavrov said, adding that Moscow is "interested in stable global energy prices to pursue long-term economic policies."

Southeast Asia hit hard by energy shock from Iran war

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong underscored her country's concern over the renewed war in the Middle East, warning that "the situation could deteriorate further without much warning."

"We want to see an end to this war. We want to see a ceasefire. We want to see negotiations and we want the strait to be opened," Wong told reporters.

"People are being affected by what is happening and has happened to global energy markets and the effect on people has been direct and personal," she said.

Overreliance on fossil fuel imports from the Middle East has made Southeast Asia particularly vulnerable to the energy shock triggered by the Iran war, according to the International Energy Agency, which called the crisis a "stark wake-up call" for the region's energy security.

Asian markets imported about 80 percent of the crude oil and almost 90 percent of the liquefied natural gas, or LNG, transiting through the Strait of Hormuz in 2025, the IEA said.

Rubio and allies reaffirm commitment to counter growing Chinese influence

Rubio also met with counterparts in the four-nation Quad partnership, which is made up of the US, Australia, India and Japan. They discussed maritime and transnational security, among other issues, and issued a joint statement after the talks that reaffirmed their commitment to maritime security initiatives aiming to counter China's growing influence in the region. During the meeting, Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi voiced strong opposition to any attempts to change the status quo by force in the region, including in the disputed South China Sea and East China Sea, where China's increasingly aggressive actions have sparked concern.

Tokyo has a long-running dispute over Japan-controlled islands, which Beijing also claims, in the East China Sea. Wong echoed his concern, saying "we have real concerns about behaviour that is destabilizing and risky."

The Trump administration has repeatedly criticized China's assertive actions in the South China Sea to the disadvantage of smaller claimant countries like the Philippines, Washington's oldest treaty ally in Asia.

The territorial disputes, which also involve Taiwan and ASEAN members Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei, are high on the agenda of the talks.

ASEAN foreign ministers discussed the disputes on Tuesday, welcoming progress in yearslong negotiations between China and their regional bloc on a proposed non-aggression pact that aims to prevent a major conflict in the disputed waters that could draw in the United States.

A new altercation on Monday between Chinese and Filipino forces in a disputed shoal renewed concerns and prompted Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to summon the Chinese ambassador in Manila.

"We reaffirmed the need to enhance mutual trust and confidence, exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability and avoid actions that may further complicate the situation," the regional bloc's ministers said in a draft joint statement.

India student protests keep up pressure on Modi government

JULIE FRAYSSE/AFP
NEW DELHI, JULY 22

Crowds of supporters of India's online "cockroach" movement grew on Wednesday at a New Delhi protest site, while their demands for accountability and reform following examination scandals echoed in rallies across the country.

The protests, led by the social media-driven Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) movement, have emerged as one of the biggest challenges to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government since his re-election in 2024.

The campaign also got a boost on Wednesday inside parliament from opposition lawmakers including Rahul Gandhi of the Congress party who demanded the government apologise for a police crackdown on a major rally on Monday.

Protesters demanding the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan have refused to leave the Jantar Mantar site in the heart of the Indian capital, with crowds swelling to several thousand people on Wednesday, according to AFP correspondents.

"The government is ruining our future," said Pooja Kushi, a 19-year-old student who came from the northern state of Haryana with her brother and two friends.

The movement has spread beyond the capital, with smaller demonstrations springing up across the country on Wednesday including in major cities like Mumbai and Bengaluru.

In eastern Patna city, police used tear gas and water cannons at a rally demanding Pradhan's resignation, according to the Press Trust of India news agency.

The protesters, most of them young students, got a major boost on Tuesday after opposition parties threw their weight behind the movement, staging a sit-in outside the prime minister's residence. Gandhi, 56, who was briefly detained on Tuesday, appeared in parliament on Wednesday dressed in black, demanding accountability from the government.

He later told reporters students had his full support, "and we are going to ensure that you are protected and your future is protected".

'Keep going'

The CJP movement, which has millions of followers on social media, emerged in May initially as a satirical response to Chief Justice Surya Kant reportedly likening young people to "cockroaches" and "parasites" during a court hearing.

The movement has broadened its agenda to include concerns over unemployment, opportunities for young people and what it describes as Modi's increasingly authoritarian style of governance.

On Monday, police fired tear gas and baton-charged tens of thousands of demonstrators as they tried to march to parliament on the opening day of the monsoon session, in the capital's largest street rally in five years.

As tensions escalated, protesters responded by hurling stones.

Rights groups have accused police of using excessive force, with Amnesty International questioning the "legality, necessity, and proportionality" of their actions.

At the Jantar Mantar site, where a group of activists has been camping for nearly a month, one protester on Wednesday said it was the first time the country's youth had an opportunity to raise their voice.

"I am scared because on Monday I saw the police beating people and using force, but we have no choice but to keep our movement going," Kavya, a 20-year-old student who gave only his first name, told AFP.

What to know about Iran's Pickaxe Mountain, home to an underground nuclear site threatened by Trump

JON GAMBRELL/AP
DUBAI, UAE, JULY 22

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly issued threats to bomb an under-construction Iranian nuclear site buried deep under a mountain as the two nations exchange blows over the Strait of Hormuz.

The site, known as Kuh-e Kolang Gaz La, or "Pickaxe Mountain," lies on the south side of Iran's Natanz nuclear enrichment site, which was bombed by the United States during Operation Midnight Hammer in 2025's 12-day war between Iran and Israel.

But Pickaxe Mountain has remained untouched as Iran continues to dig at the site. It remains unclear just what has been placed at Pickaxe Mountain, as the United Nations' nuclear watchdog has never gained access to the site. But Trump on Tuesday talking with journalists in the Oval Office acknowledged the possibility Iran may have moved centrifuges there, potentially at a depth that would challenge even the most-powerful bombs in America's arsenal.

"We'll be hitting that area ... probably pretty soon. And there's not a thing they can do about it," Trump said. Here's what to know about Pickaxe Mountain and the status of Iran's nuclear programme.

Pickaxe Mountain site was built after earlier attacks on Iran

The new project at Pickaxe Mountain is being constructed next to Natanz, about 225 kilometres (140 miles) south of Tehran, Iran's capital. Natanz, a mix of above- and underground facilities, has been a point of international concern since its existence became known two decades ago.

Repeated sabotage attacks on Natanz, including one likely carried out by Israel that destroyed a manufacturing site for centrifuges, led Iranian officials to start work on the Pickaxe Mountain site.

Protected by anti-aircraft batteries, fencing and Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, the facility sprawls across 2.7 square kilometres (1 square mile) in the country's arid Central Plateau. It has multiple entrances visible from satellite images. In 2023, an Associated Press story on Pickaxe Mountain included analysis from experts at the James Martin Centre for Nonproliferation Studies that suggested Iran is likely building a facility at a depth of between 80 metres and 100 metres. Digging has continued at the site in the time since, with some experts suggesting it could be even deeper underground.

Experts say the size of the construction project indicates Iran will likely be able to use the underground facility to enrich uranium as well as to build centrifuges. Centrifuges, tube-shaped devices arranged in large cascades of dozens of machines, rapidly spin uranium gas to enrich it. Additional cascades spinning would allow Iran to quickly enrich uranium under the mountain's protection. Such underground facilities led the US to create the GBU-57 bomb, which can plough through at least 60 metres of earth before detonating, according to the American military. US officials reportedly have discussed using two such bombs in succession to ensure a site is destroyed. It is not clear that such a one-two punch would damage a facility as deep as the one at Pickaxe Mountain.

AP/RSS

This June 15 photo from Planet Labs PBC shows Iran's Natanz nuclear enrichment facility, upper right, and the under-construction at Pickaxe Mountain directly to the south of it.

Trump threatens to bomb Pickaxe Mountain site

Speaking alongside Lebanese President Joseph Aoun on Tuesday, Trump initially sought to downplay Pickaxe Mountain by bringing up Iran's stockpile of highly enriched uranium. Iran had enriched uranium up to nearly weapons-grade levels of 60 percent before the 2025 strikes. In the time since, Iran is not known to have restarted enrichment and its stockpile is believed to be at still at the bombed enrichment sites.

"We follow the material, that's where the action is," Trump told journalists.

Trump, however, said Pickaxe Mountain was a potential target for American bombers as back-and-forth attacks between Iran and the US rage on. "Normally I wouldn't say that," the president added. "If I thought they could do something about it, I would never say that, but we'll be hitting that area pretty soon. And very heavily."

Iran says that areas around its only nuclear power plant at Bushehr have already come under attack during the war, though no damage was done to its Russian-run reactor. Tehran also said the US attacked the cleared area where it plans to build the Darkhovin nuclear plant, though the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency says there was no atomic material there the last time they inspected the site.

The only nuclear power plant in the United Arab Emirates, its four-reactor facility at Barakah, also has been targeted during the war. Iran has since warned that it would take unspecified "required actions" to respond to the Darkhovin attack.

Germany approves controversial French-Russian nuclear project

BERLIN: German authorities said on Wednesday they were giving the green light to a controversial French-Russian nuclear project which critics fear will enable spying and sabotage by Moscow.

The planned joint venture by a subsidiary of French company Framatome and Russia's state-owned nuclear power agency Rosatom is aimed at producing fuel rods used in Russian-designed reactors.

The project would be based at Framatome's fuel rod assembly facility in the town of Lingen in the state of Lower Saxony.

Framatome's subsidiary ANF (Advanced Nuclear Fuels) applied for permission for the project in March 2022, just weeks after Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The state's environment ministry said in a statement on Wednesday it had "decided to approve" the project.

This was despite the state's environment minister, Christian Meyer, restating his position that "dealings and close co-operation with Putin's nuclear agency are totally wrong".

He said however that his ministry had "no legal possibility to reject or put a time limit to the application" in the absence of sanctions on Rosatom. **(AFP)**

23rd NSJF Pulsar Sports Award scheduled for September

Nepal's premier sports award will feature nine categories, with five winners taking home Pulsar motorcycles.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF NSJF

NSJF President Niranjan Adhikari (right) and Golchha Group Director Abhimanyu Golchha sign an MoU for the 23rd edition of NSJF Pulsar Sports Award in Kathmandu on Wednesday.

NAYAK PAUDEL
KATHMANDU, JULY 22

The Nepal Sports Journalists Forum on Wednesday announced that the 23rd edition of the annual NSJF Pulsar Sports Award will take place on September 3 at the Nepal Police Club in Kathmandu.

The announcement was made during the announcement and signing ceremony, where the forum also officially confirmed the continuation of its long-standing partnership with the main sponsor, Golchha Group.

This marks the 19th consecutive edition of Golchha Group's association with the country's most prestigious sports award. Both parties had signed a five-year agreement last year, with the partnership currently running in its second year.

NSJF President Niranjan Adhikari and Golchha Group Director Abhimanyu Golchha signed an MoU for the 23rd edition during the event.

"We take pride in being associated with the forum for 19 consecutive years," Golchha said after the signing. "We have been walking together in sports for a long time, but our relationship with the forum has evolved into something deeply special. We wish the forum every success for the upcoming event."

Adhikari expressed his gratitude to the corporate house, noting that the consistent backing from Golchha Group has allowed the forum to organise the awards systematically and maintain its continuity over nearly two decades.

NSJF General Secretary Anjan Khadka informed that honours will be presented across nine categories this year: Male Player of the Year, Female Player of the Year, Youth Player of the Year, Coach of the Year, People's Choice Award, Para-Athlete Honour, Special Award, Lifetime Achievement Award, and the Asian Sports Journalist Award.

Khadka added that the nominations for five categories—Male, Female, Youth, Coach, and People's Choice—will be announced in a few days.

The nominees for the People's Choice Award will be revealed early to allow sufficient time for public voting. Meanwhile, the winners of the Lifetime Achievement, Special, Para-Athlete, and Asian Sports Journalist awards will be revealed directly on the event day.

Winners of the Male, Female, Youth, Coach, and People's Choice categories will be rewarded with Pulsar motorcycles. Winners and honourees in the remaining categories will receive cash prizes of Rs100,000 each.

In the previous edition, national cricket team all-rounder Dipendra Singh Airee and karateka Erika Gurung took home the Male and Female Player of the Year awards, respectively. Cricketer Puja Mahato was named Youth Player of the Year, while para-taekwondo mentor Kabiraj Negi Lama won Coach of the Year. Volleyball's Himal Sunari won the People's Choice Award after securing the highest number of votes.

Additionally, taekwondo's Tulsi Kumar Gurung received the Special Award, Prabha Angdembe was honoured with the Para-Athlete award, Bangladeshi journalist Rana Hasan won the Asian Sports Journalist Award and veteran sports personality Khadga Ranabhat was conferred with the Lifetime Achievement Award.

Tyson Fury says 'best yet to come'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
PATTAYA, JULY 22

British boxer Tyson Fury insisted on Wednesday that "the best is yet to come" ahead of a charity fight in Thailand, a warm-up to his long-awaited clash with Anthony Joshua.

"I don't feel like the world's seen the best Tyson Fury yet," said the former two-time world heavyweight champion, who turns 38 next month.

Fury was speaking at an event in the Thai resort of Pattaya to promote his charity fight on Friday against Mariusz Wach, a 46-year-old Pole dubbed "The Viking". The fight in the 1,500-seat Max Muay Thai Stadium is widely viewed as a warm-up to the much-anticipated clash with fellow Briton Joshua expected later this year.

AFP/RSS

Britain's Tyson Fury (left) and Poland's Mariusz Wach attend a press conference ahead of their charity boxing bout in Pattaya on Wednesday.

But Fury said he did not want to talk about the Joshua fight, instead focusing on his presence in Thailand and saying that it left him feeling "rejuvenated". "I've been over here since December—beautiful place, beautiful people, great training facilities," he said. "I feel at peace with everything, where before I had a lot of pressure on me...the rain wasn't good, I think I thrive better in obviously warmer climates."

Fury marked his return from a 16-month retirement with a dominant points win over Russia's Arslanbek Makhmudov in April. He was scheduled to fight in Dublin on August 1, but said the opportunity arose to fight in Thailand "for a good cause".

Proceeds from Friday's fight will go to a charity supporting underprivileged children in Pattaya.

The venue is smaller than those Fury is used to, and the fight won't be broadcast live on television but will be recorded for his Netflix television series.

Fury said he had "earned the right" to do what he wanted. "Whoever I want to fight, from any sport, I can make that fight happen. Because I'm the Gypsy King, I do what I want," he said. He said his fights were "not about the money".

"I'm boxing because I want to stay match fit and I enjoy doing it."

Born into a family of Irish Traveller heritage in Wythenshawe in the Manchester suburbs, Fury turned pro in 2008. He famously dethroned long-reigning champion Wladimir Klitschko in 2015, and is known for his exceptional speed despite his towering size of 6 feet 9 inches (2.06 metres).

Joshua, a two-time heavyweight champion, will fight Kristian Prenga in Saudi Arabia on Saturday.

It will be his first return to the ring since being involved in a car crash in Nigeria in December that killed two of his close friends.

Stephen Curry to have dedicated exhibit at the Basketball Hall of Fame, first for an active player

ASSOCIATED PRESS
SPRINGFIELD, JULY 22

Stephen Curry is headed to the Hall of Fame, making more basketball history with a first-of-its-kind exhibit for an active player.

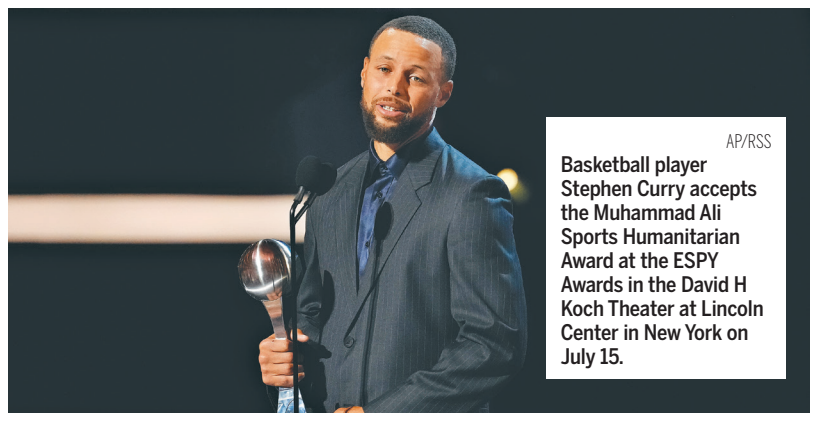
Stephen Curry: Beyond the Arc is set to open Friday, celebrating the career of a two-time MVP and the NBA's career leader in 3-pointers.

The Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame announced the exhibit Tuesday, saying it was the first time in the museum's nearly 75-year history that an active player would have a dedicated feature experience.

"When I think about my journey, I think about the people who believed in me, the work that happened when nobody was watching and the moments that shaped me on and off the court. To have that story told while I'm still playing is something I don't take lightly," Curry said in a statement. "My hope is that fans walk through this experience and feel the joy, the purpose and the gratitude that basketball has given me, and maybe see a little bit of their own journey in it too."

Developed in partnership with Curry's Thirty Ink business team, the exhibit will feature video footage of Curry's career, memorabilia and audio and video components that tell the story of a player who was overlooked going into college and has gone on to become a 12-time All-Star who led Golden State to four NBA championships. "For him to become the first active player to have an exhibit in the Basketball Hall of Fame is a testament to what he represents to the game, to the Warriors, to the NBA and to his millions of fans around the world," Warriors general manager Mike Dunleavy said. "Obviously, this is only a prelude to his eventual induction in Springfield, but a fitting tribute to an iconic player and an amazing human being who has single-handedly changed the game."

The Hall of Fame expects Curry's to be a limited-time exhibit, likely to last through the summer of 2027 before closing.



AP/RSS

Basketball player Stephen Curry accepts the Muhammad Ali Sports Humanitarian Award at the ESPY Awards in the David H Koch Theater at Lincoln Center in New York on July 15.

> The Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame announced the exhibit Tuesday.

HOROSCOPE

ARIES (March 21-April 19)
Reclaim your power by working with existing resources and vow to save more money moving forward. Show love to the divine forces that guide you tonight, asking for aid or illumination as needed.

TAURUS (April 20-May 20)
Though the process of unpacking your feelings isn't always fun, these vibes will make it difficult to ignore them. You'll have plenty of opportunities to catch up on tasks you put off for now.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21)
Heavy thoughts will be hard to ignore this morning. Try to look on the bright side of life, or your optimism could take a serious hit. You'll have plenty to keep busy with.

CANCER (June 22-July 22)
Recognize how modern innovations have removed you from the natural world. Work on existing goals, embrace play, and experiment with your art as you navigate these vibes. You'll find an efficient flow.

LEO (July 23-August 22)
Take responsibility for decisions you made that led to challenges or lost opportunities. Combat these issues by tapping into your potential and taking yourself and your goals more seriously. Don't pressure yourself to make a fresh start.

VIRGO (August 23-September 22)
Embrace meditative, spiritual, or philosophical practices that bring some sense of peace. However, her void-of-course state suggests that ideas that trickle in are unlikely to materialize. Instead of pushing for change, find strength in the present.

LIBRA (September 23-October 22)
Avoid social hierarchies that have grown toxic or intensely competitive. Drama that erupts is likely a byproduct of someone else's issues, but it's not your responsibility to heal people who won't help themselves.

SCORPIO (October 23-November 21)
Use this energy as an opportunity to reset emotionally and energetically, rather than pushing for results you're not yet capable of producing. You should also avoid taking on projects or making promises for now.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22-December 21)
Take care of yourself, ensuring your body has the endurance necessary to keep up with your dreams. Wellness and success go hand in hand, but habits must be sustainable to be effective.

CAPRICORN (December 22-January 19)
Sacrifices you've quietly made over time will start to add up. If you're not in the mood to socialize, don't force yourself to. Lay low with someone who knows the real you to regain confidence and find joy.

AQUARIUS (January 20-February 18)
As you sort through big feelings and try to make sense of what your heart desires, loved ones may seem uncharacteristically emotional. Offer up the compassion you expect from family and friends.

PISCES (February 19-March 20)
It might not be the best day to debut important projects or make a major announcement. You'll have a shot at gaining the notoriety you seek. However, there may be a few hurdles to overcome.

ASTROLOGY.COM

CROSSWORD

ACROSS
1 Mil. gp. on campus
5 Discard
10 Org.
14 Deep-sea fish
15 Total
16 Item for a matador
17 "Limp watches" artist
18 Duck
19 Baby's bed
20 Put into office
22 Sub (Hyph.)
24 Actress — Winslet
25 No-returns warning (2 wds.)
26 Part
28 Animal
32 Big gun
33 Sibilant sound
34 Mal de —
35 Kitchen scrap
36 Assist
37 Tavern
38 Strummed instrument, briefly
39 Gong
41 Equine animals
44 Excused
46 Linger
47 Compulsion
48 Difficult to find
49 Ford that flopped
51 Of vision
55 Run
56 "— — and his money are soon parted"
59 Japanese sport
60 Trig function
61 Scandinavian
62 Further
63 Made a hole-in-one
64 Obligations
65 Conflicts

DOWN
1 Went on
2 Iridescent gem
3 Narrative
4 Farm bird
5 Add sugar to
6 Scold
7 Singer — Stewart
8 Fermented drink
9 Reads
10 Approach and speak to
11 Poet — Teasdale
12 Rod for roasting
13 Kan. neighbor
21 Tex-Mex fare
23 Prejudice
25 Saharan
26 Garment with a hood
27 Bury
28 Offspring
29 Earth pigment
30 —, willing and able
31 Goofs
32 — de grace
36 Toward shelter
39 Drill
40 Most of Great Britain
41 Metal fasteners
42 Sour
43 "Able was I — — — Elba"
45 Did a household job
48 Perch
49 Cartman of "South Park"
50 Over and — with
52 — libres (cocktail)
53 The States (Abbr.)
54 Oodles
55 Bag-check org.
57 Enemy
58 Sphere

PREVIOUS PUZZLE SOLVED

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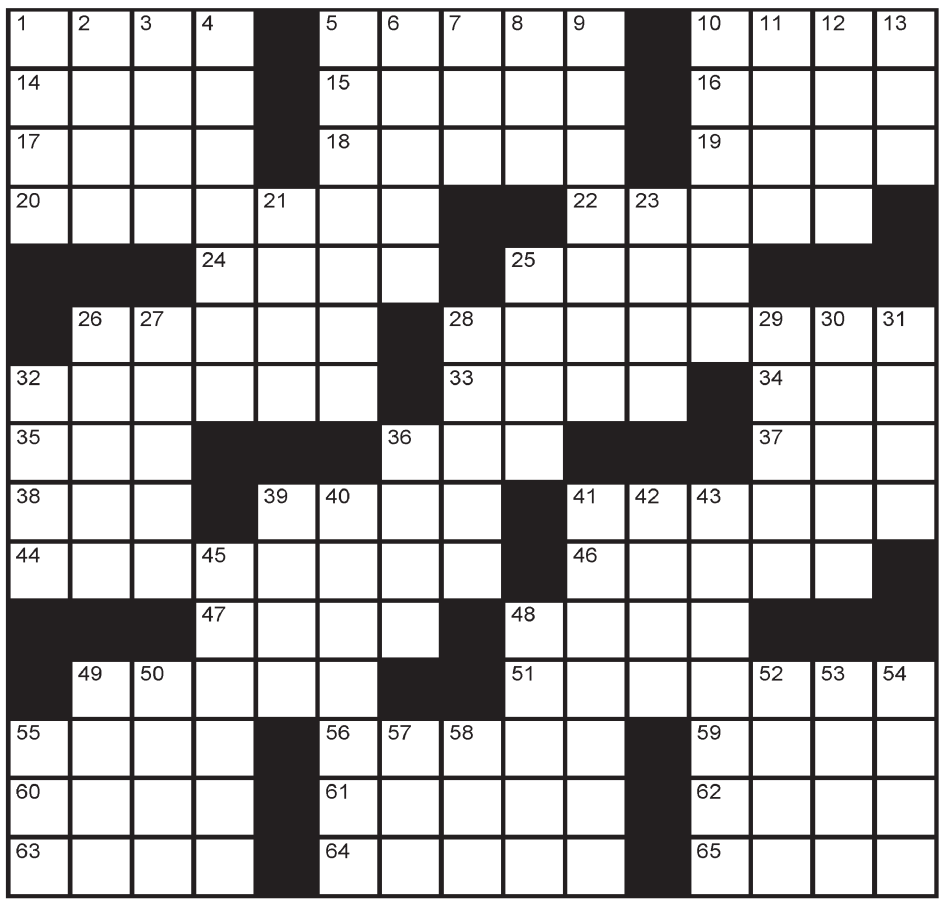

SUDOKU

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9	5	2	4	3	6	7	1	8
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YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

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(C.R.P.D.) - 3/052/053

The performance of persecution

A mock courtroom trial turns into a disturbing examination of misogyny, collective judgment and the ease with which ordinary people become complicit in cruelty.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF DINESH SUBEDI

SHRINKHALA CHAND THAKURI
KATHMANDU

Courts are built on performance. Judges perform authority. Lawyers perform certainty. Witnesses perform truth. Even the accused must perform innocence convincingly enough to be believed.

'Shh! Ijlaas Jaari Chha…' understands that theatre is not very different. Both ask people to step into roles, convince strangers, and blur the line between fiction and reality. Gunjan Dixit's production takes that similarity one step further. It asks how far a game can go before it stops being one. How long till the court ends?

THEATRE REVIEW

Adapted by Bijay Bisfot (J.B. Deuja) from Vijay Tendulkar's 'Silence! The Court is in Session', Gunjan Dixit's production follows a travelling theatre troupe preparing to stage a courtroom drama in a village community hall. When one actor fails to arrive, the inexperienced Ishwar is asked to fill in. Since he has never seen a courtroom, the troupe decides to teach him by staging a mock trial. Devyani becomes the accused. The charge, an unmarried woman accused of abortion, is imaginary.

At least, at first.

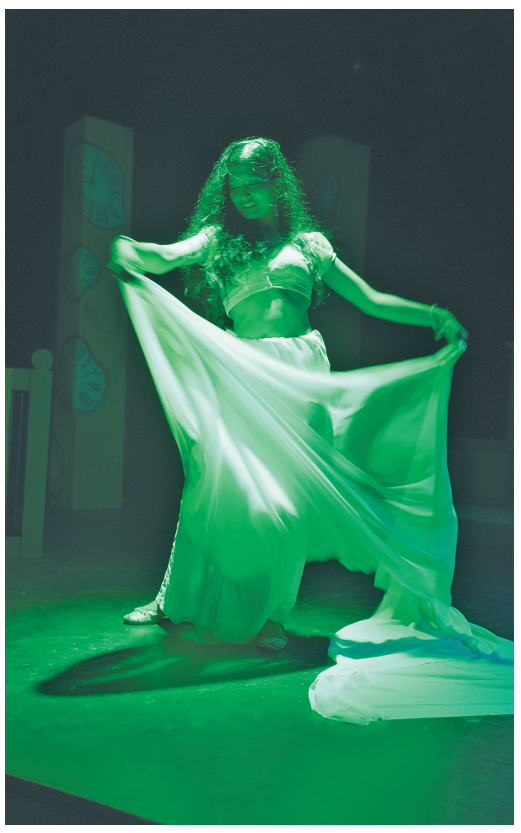
The production's greatest achievement is that it never tells the audience exactly when the rehearsal ends. Nobody announces that the game has gone too far. The actors just become better at their roles. Their questions aim to hurt. They stop searching for answers and start searching for wounds.

By the time Devyani asks them to stop, the mock trial has acquired its own momentum. Nobody is interested in whether the accusations are true anymore. They are too busy performing justice.

The audience laughs during the opening scenes. The actors are genuinely funny. Their conversations have the looseness of people who know each other well, constantly interrupting, teasing and feeding off one another's energy. The humour never feels manufactured. That natural chemistry makes what follows significantly harder to watch because the hostility grows from familiarity. Nobody suddenly becomes a villain. They simply keep saying yes to the game.

The audience laughs in the beginning. I found myself wondering afterwards exactly when we stopped.

The transformation works because the actors never play it as a transformation. Nobody suddenly becomes cruel. They simply become more convincing. The jokes land, the banter feels effortless, and before long those same performers are constructing increasingly personal accusations with the confidence of people who believe they are only doing their jobs. The most unsettling part is that the play never changes tone overnight. It changes intention.



Watching the troupe slowly become a jury is perhaps the production's cleverest piece of direction. Their individuality begins to disappear. The lively actors from the opening half, each with their own quirks and rhythms, flatten into something anonymous. They stop behaving like friends rehearsing together and start sounding like procedure. It is difficult to tell exactly when that happens. By the time you notice, the courtroom has already taken over.

The production rarely explains its symbolism, and it is better for it. The woman in white appears and disappears without announcing who she is supposed to be. She could be Devyani's younger self, the child everyone insists on speaking for, or simply a life untouched by public judgment. The production never insists on an answer because ambiguity is doing the work. Not every symbol needs a caption.

That confidence extends beyond symbolism. Dixit understands that tension is often built by subtraction rather than addition. The murmuring jury gradually replaces conversation until individual voices disappear into collective judgment. The typewriter, initially just another courtroom prop, slowly begins to sound like a verdict being written in real time. Even the lighting conspires against Devyani, isolating her while everyone else remains physically close. She is surrounded by people. That is precisely the problem.

Anuska Karki's Devyani is the emotional centre of the production, although the play wisely refuses to reduce her to a victim. She begins as someone capable of teasing, joking and arguing with everyone else. As the trial continues, that confidence is slowly stripped away through seemingly small moments. She forgets the lines of Devkota's Pagal. She hesitates before answering questions. Eventually, silence becomes her only defence.

Still, the production never lets that silence become surrender.

Devyani remembers writing, "The grass is green, the roses are red, this book is mine till I'm dead," in her childhood notebook. Later, she corrects the rhyme: "No. I am not dead." It is a small rebellion, but a satisfying one.

Not every character receives the same level of complexity, though. Rame occasionally slips into caricature, while a few supporting characters seem designed more to represent social attitudes than fully realised people. Yet this feels less damaging than it might have in another play because 'Shh! Ijalas Jaari Cha…' is ultimately less interested in individuals than in crowds. The production asks how ordinary people become participants in extraordinary cruelty. That question requires types as much as personalities.

It would be easy to leave the theatre calling this a play about misogyny. Of course it is. But that feels like letting the audience escape too easily. The interesting thing is not how quickly Devyani was judged. It was how eager everyone else was to judge her. The courtroom is frightening not because it is full of villains but because it is full of ordinary people who mistake participation for responsibility. Nobody believes they are doing harm. They are simply following the rules of the game.

The final image leaves little room for comfort. Devyani's white sari, now covered with questions, rumours and verdicts, becomes the physical weight of everything the courtroom has projected onto her. The performers carry it into the audience long after the trial is over, refusing to let judgment remain confined to the stage.

Long after the performance ends, Devyani's suffering lingers. So does the uncomfortable recognition that the audience, too, accepted the mock trial as entertainment before realising what it had become.

By the time the lights fade, the rehearsal has long since ended.

The game hasn't.

The court, indeed, is still in session.

Shh! Ijalas Jaari Cha...
When: 03 July to 25 July
Where: Mandala Theatre
Time: 5:30 PM,
Extra Shows on Saturdays at 1:30 PM
Entry: Rs300 - Rs500

'Dialogue And Perception' at Kala Salon

Sagar Manandhar's solo exhibit traces the evolving language of his decades-long engagement with abstraction.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE KALA SALON

Dialogue And Perception (Sambad ra Dristikon)
When: Until August 8
Where: The Kala Salon, Thamel
Time: 11:00 am to 8:00 pm
Entry: Free

JONY NEPAL
KATHMANDU

The Kala Salon has announced 'Dialogue And Perception (Sambad ra Dristikon)', a solo exhibit of abstract paintings by Nepali artist and educator Sagar Manandhar. The exhibition will be on view until August 8.

Featuring a body of luminous, large-scale canvases, including works on linen executed in proportions, the exhibition marks a new chapter in Manandhar's decades-long exploration of abstraction.

Known for a style that is consistent and continually evolving, his work spans canvas types and formats, with a particular affinity for large-scale linen canvases marked by lines that reward sustained contemplation.

"The rhythm, the vibes, and the surroundings are never accidental. They are the first observation of every work I create. For me, a new creative approach doesn't only begin with an idea, but with a felt surrounding: the subtle hum of materials waiting to be perceived," says Manandhar.

Curator Sophia L Pandé notes that Manandhar's evolution within a single, instantly recognisable style, varying in method, execution, and canvas type, is the hallmark of a true creative.

"This series is an exceptional body of work from a protean artist who understands what it means for abstract work to be underscored by method, research and meaning, even while experimenting," she says.

Pickleball is the star of the sports comedy 'The Dink'

A former tennis prodigy reluctantly takes up pickleball, leading to an affectionate and eccentric sports comedy about ego and second chances.

LINDSEY BAHR

It's the tennis establishment versus pickleball enthusiasts at an uptight club in 'The Dink,' a kind of spiritual descendant of 'Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story.' The story itself is very similar to the books: A once promising tennis prodigy learns to get over himself and his disdain for the 'lesser sport.'

In one version of the world it could have been 'The Cutting Edge.' But the film chose the grounded, goofy route, with memorably eccentric characters and a few high profile cameos that add up to an enjoyable watch.

Jake Johnson plays the has been, Dusty, whose domineering father, Chuck (Ed Harris) had groomed him for tennis stardom since he was born.

He called his son 'The Hammer' long before he'd even told him his real name, we're told in an amusing introduction. But as with so many sports prodigies, Dusty flamed out early (in a match against a young Andy Roddick, no less). Now he teaches tennis lessons to kids at his dad's club and bores them with stories of his glory days. He has but one remaining friend: PJ, an earnest sycophant and kindhearted weirdo played by Australian comedian Aaron Chen.

Dusty and his father hate pickleball with a passion, so when Dusty's doctor (a brief, funny appearance by Ben Stiller, who also produced) recommends it as rehab for a wrist injury, it's a sentence worse than death. Naturally, he'll eventually change his tune when he starts playing with a group of older women, including Candace (Mary Steenburgen), Gail (Cleo King) and Judy (the late Lynne Marie Stewart).

Johnson is excellent at playing the not-always-lovable loser. One of his new friends says she thinks he looks like Timothée Chalamet; he laughs that no one has ever said, or thought, that before. But she could be on to something: Dusty is kind of on the Marty Supreme spectrum.

Steenburgen is also lovely and funny, while Harris is the perfect alpha dad; Can't more filmmakers and screenwriters figure out how to use our septuagenarians well?

The film is packed with comic actors in smaller roles too: Patton Oswalt is the club's resident pickleball enthusiast, Chloe Fineman is a crazy ex-girlfriend and Chris Parnell is a tennis pro. Directed by Josh Greenbaum and written by Sean Clements, it is moderately successful in toeing the line between silly and heartfelt. And, to its credit, it doesn't go so low as to make pickleball and its players the butt of every joke. There are some, to be sure; But it's mostly done so lovingly.

And within all this there is one sequence that might just be the funniest bit of the year. I won't be so cruel as to spoil what I'm talking about (or so bold to think that words might do it justice) but I will say that it involves none of the main characters and has very little to do with the story. It is just ridiculous and perfect.

AP/RSS

Greenbaum, who was also behind 'Barb and Star Go to Vista Del Mar' and the upcoming 'Spaceballs' sequel, is carving out a nice space for himself as a reliable director of comedies, a genre that seems almost endangered on the big screen.

This is a curious time for the movies: The appetite for theatrical moviegoing is clearly there, and not just for 'The Odyssey.' And yet this week has two mainstream comedies, including the Kevin Hart bachelor party movie '72 Hours,' with starry casts that are going straight to streaming.

The silver lining is that people are still making straight comedies, but there's something that's lost when they skip the movie theater entirely. Sure, you can gather the family in the living room, but not all families have the same type of humor. It's hard to submit to something if the people around you aren't having a good time. In a theater, there's at least a chance that there are some other kindred spirits around to laugh, or even groan, with. (I cannot speak to the quality of '72 Hours.')

'The Dink,' an Apple TV release streaming Friday, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association for 'strong language and sexual material.' Running time: 102 minutes. Two and a half stars out of four.

– Associated Press

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