

The Start of Something New?

Christopher Butler



As Nepal's autumn holiday season passed in 2016, Kathmandu Valley residents began bracing themselves to endure the six months of load shedding they had been trained to expect over the years.

But then something funny happened? Like a pot of water that won't boil if watched, load shedding stayed away even as we waited for it to come.

It is important to note (at our print date in January) that some industry and academic institutions in the Valley were and are still experiencing load shedding. And there have been singular days since October 2016 when load shedding returned for an hour or two during peak load times.

But generally, load shedding has been very low this season, and much due credit has been given to Kulman Ghising, the current managing director of the Nepal Electricity Authority. Under directive from the Minister of Energy, Janardan Sharma, Ghising has virtually eliminated load shedding from the Valley grid through a series of necessary reforms that are equal parts overdue and fortuitous.

However, in some corners, others ask why it seemed so easy to end load shedding this year. Why did it take so long to ensure 24 hour power?

The Overdue

As noted in fine detail in the 9 December 2016 Nepali Times, Ghising and NEA used newly-acquired political clout to confront long-standing corruption. Since 2006, industry and commercial consumers were paying bribes to NEA employees for privileged access to uninterrupted electricity. These power gains came at the cost of personal consumers.

To cover their tracks, NEA exaggerated the amount of power shortfall to the public and used the "invisible" available electricity to generate bribes from industry.

But the travails and corruption of NEA are not exactly news. These practices had long been suspected by the public, but the powerful union of NEA coupled with political protection prevented meaningful reforms from taking place.

So, what was different this time? A little bit of luck and a little bit of hard work.

The Fortuitous

More than 100 MW have been added to the grid at

the Syuchatar sub-station, combined with another 80 MW being imported from India through the Makwanpur-Dhalkebar connection. River flows have been higher in late 2016 see in past years, and while that may raise alarm about global warming, it has also meant more available power from run-of-river projects.

The additional supply has been made even more powerful by the lower demand in 2016. Thinking back a year, the Indian blockade of 2015-2016 created drastic shortfalls in all petro-energy supplies, so people turned to electricity to run their households. In 2015, peak load demand was 1,205 MW compared to just 796 MW this year. Hence, this year the demand for electric energy in peak and off-peak hours is much less, reducing the gap in supply shortfalls.

But the larger point is that the end of load shedding was not so much a technical fix as a political one. And this remains the key point of this story.

Some of my informants for this article, who requested to stay off the record, suggested that no legal punishments would be delivered because the stain of corruption (the payoffs and distribution of bribes) ran too deeply into the organization and political parties. So, while certain privileged individuals have enjoyed privileged access to electricity for the past decade, the rest of the population has been forced to endure widening power cuts and the associated diminished quality of life this entails.

We should be reminded that as Nepal attempts to develop its vast hydro resources for national development, the largest obstacle is not the financiers or the environmentalists or the bureaucrats in government offices. Nepali development hinges on political influence and the willingness of parties and representatives to focus on their constituents, and not their power.

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