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Editor's Note

India aims to showcase its role as a bridge between developing and developed nations at COP28. Despite setbacks, such as support for Israel conflicting with the global south consensus, India has leveraged platforms like the G-20 to emphasize issues affecting developing countries. Its climate leadership includes ambitious net-zero pledges and calls for accountability in emission reduction and climate finance commitments. The nation's active role aligns with its aspiration to lead on global issues.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin held the 2+2 ministerial dialogue in New Delhi with their Indian counterparts. The focus was on countering China through military and nonmilitary means, enhancing India's military capabilities, and reducing global reliance on Chinese technology. Other topics included trade, clean energy, and higher education collaboration. Despite recent global shocks, U.S.-India relations remained robust, with some potential constraints due to the Israel-Hamas conflict and Russia's war in Ukraine. Ongoing cooperation and a potential visit by U.S. President Joe Biden in 2024 aimed to sustain the partnership.

The U.S. will invest \$553 million in an Adani Group port project in Colombo, countering China's influence in Sri Lanka. Despite recent fraud allegations, the Adani Group shows resilience with international deals, a \$3.5 billion refinancing package, and successes in India's clean energy sector. Gautam Adani's close ties to the Indian government and strategic decisions contribute to the conglomerate's apparent resilience.

Confirmed attendees at the U.N. climate summit in Dubai include leaders from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is listed, but her attendance is unconfirmed. Bhutan's delegation leader is not announced. Afghanistan, under Taliban sanctions, lacks formal representation.

You can read these and more in this issue of South Asia Bulletin.

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Country Brief

Bangladesh

Conflict and unrest incessantly riddles Bangladesh as people from different facets rebel against the unjust government. The opposition party carried out a [48-hour-long nationwide strike](#) against the government, demanding the resignation of Sheikh Hasina and a free and fair election in January. Supporting the opposition party, [Ameer Rezaul Karim of the Islamic Andolan Bangladesh](#) demanded the resignation of the Prime Minister, announcing an ultimatum to run larger campaigns against the government if their demands were not met accordingly. The hope for a free and fair election seems dire for the BNP as arbitrary arrests of their members and activists fill the crowded jails of Bangladesh, including Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir, BNP's Secretary General. With around [25,000 BNP members](#) and activists in jail, the general public has no faith in fair elections. The opposition wants to oust Sheikh Hasina from the government.

Addressing the protests by garment workers for a pay rise that grew violent, the government finally decided to deal with their demands. The workers who demanded a minimum wage of 23,000 Bangladeshi takas (USD 209 approx) were met with an increase of [56.25 percent, from 8,300 takas to 12,500 takas \(USD 113 approx\)](#), barely meeting half of their total demands. Sheikh Hasina brutally declared, "If they take to the streets to protest at someone's instigation, they will lose their job, lose their work, and will have to return to their village," implying that workers do not have a choice but to work.

Parallely, conflict takes a peaceful turn in the hilly tracts of Bangladesh, which has forever been prone to conflict. The newly found armed rebel group, [Kuki-Chin National Front \(KNF\)](#), reportedly connected with insurgent organizations like the Jamatul Sharqiya, has decided upon a [temporary ceasefire](#) to revisit their demands through negotiations and table talk discussions.

Bhutan

Bhutan prepared for its primary round of the Fourth National Assembly (NA) elections 2023-2024 with a [48-hour nationwide blackout](#). The blackout intended to maintain fairness in voting procedures by not allowing parties or the general public to engage in public meetings or campaigning on the day of elections that could change the votes in one way or another. The blackout also entailed restricting the publication, broadcast, or transmission of anything online resembling campaigns, support, or dissent for candidates in media platforms. Despite efforts to make the elections as inclusive and fair as possible, the voter turnout saw a decline of 3 percent this year, with a [voter turnout of 63 percent](#) in total. It portrayed a significant decline because registered voters had increased by 58,395 in the past five years.

Thimphu observed a sharp decline in electricity exports as domestic consumption increased. Despite consistent electricity generation, the export of electricity was reported to have [declined by 18.8 percent](#) in the first nine months of 2023. Since domestic tariffs were much less significant than export tariffs, revenue generated decreased with exports. Income tax contributions [increased by 12.5 percent](#). A significant portion was due to increased dividends from big corporations in the country, such as Druk Holding and Investments (DHI).

In hopes of progressing their agenda on [carbon neutrality](#), the Bhutan Pavilion in the 28th Conference of Parties (COP28) had prepared to pledge carbon neutrality while demanding to reap the benefits of the carbon trade early on. They also anticipated discussions on Bhutan's alarming rate of glacial melting.

| | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 (As of Sept) |
|--|--------|-----------|-------------------|
| Total generation (MU) | 10.795 | 10,749.63 | 8,348.07 |
| Export (Nu in billions) | 24 | 23 | 25 |
| Domestic sales (Nu in billions) | 4 | 4 | 5 |

China

China's economy is showing no signs of improvement. The economy [contracted](#) in November, with the Purchasing Manager Index (PMI) decreasing by 0.1 percent compared with October. Because of a stronger-than-expected outturn in the third quarter and amendments to the monetary policy and real estate policies, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has [upgraded](#) its forecast for China's economy to 5.4 percent in 2023 and 4.6 percent in 2024. Despite the corrections to the economy, capital flight has [intensified](#), with China reporting its [first-ever quarterly deficit](#) in foreign direct investment since records began in 1998. With falling exports amid the trade war with the United States, low-interest rates, and capital flight, the [yuan continuously declined](#) more than 5 percent against the dollar and euro this year.

President Xi Jinping [attended](#) the 30th APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in the US and delivered a speech calling for a commitment to free and open trade, opposition to politicizing economic issues, and the promotion of regional economic integration, including the acceleration of the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific. However, the highlights of the visit were the bilateral talks between US President Joe Biden and Xi and Xi's dining with the US business executives. The former event realized an [agreement](#) between the two leaders to curb the production of fentanyl, and in the latter event, US business executives [greeted](#) Xi Jinping with standing ovations.

India

India initiated a high-level [inquiry](#) following concerns raised by U.S. authorities that India was behind

the plot to assassinate a Sikh separatist leader, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, on American soil. Responding to these allegations, Canada has also urged India to [cooperate](#) in the investigation into the murder of another Sikh separatist leader, Hardeep Singh Nijjar.

Despite recent attempts to ease tensions, such as India's decision to resume issuing e-visas for Canadian tourists and businesses, prospects for a significant improvement in bilateral relations remain dim shortly.

In a separate diplomatic move, India is [strengthening](#) economic ties with Taiwan. The plan involves sending tens of thousands of Indian workers to the island as early as next month, potentially unsettling neighboring China. Taiwan is considering employing up to 100,000 Indians across various sectors, including factories, farms, and hospitals. An employment mobility agreement between the two nations is anticipated to be signed as early as December.

In a dramatic turn, all 41 construction workers [trapped](#) in an under-construction tunnel in Uttarakhand state for 17 days were rescued. These workers hail from some of the country's poorest states. According to doctors at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in the nearby city of Rishikesh, all 41 workers are "physically normal" and "clinically stable." They have been given a clean bill of health and are medically cleared for discharge.

Nepal

The western districts of Jajarkot and Rukum West in the Himalayan country were struck by a powerful 6.4-magnitude [earthquake](#), resulting in the tragic loss of 153 lives. According to reports, 26,557 houses were [destroyed](#), and an additional 35,455 suffered partial damage, accounting for around Rs 2 billion in property losses.

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal actively participated in the two-day high-level segment of COP 28, the World Climate Action Summit held in Dubai. During the summit, the prime minister took the initiative to [host](#) a significant side event titled "Call of the Mountain: Who Saves Us from the Climate Crisis?" to amplify Nepal's stance on climate change. This event also advocated for the mountain agenda within the COP negotiation process.

The nation has made history as the first in South Asia to legalize [same-sex marriage](#). Surendra Pandey, 27, from Kawasoti Municipality-8 in Nawalparasi East, and Ram Bahadur Gurung, 37, from Dordi Rural Municipality-2 in Lamjung, have officially registered their marriage. This groundbreaking development follows the landmark ruling by the Supreme Court on June 27, which mandated the government to recognize and register marriages involving same-sex and non-heterosexual couples.

Pakistan

Pakistan initiated the expulsion of 1.7 million undocumented foreigners, primarily Afghans, marking one of the largest such actions. Officials cite public welfare and safety, while the move likely stems from domestic politics and strained relations with the Taliban-led Afghanistan. Though Pakistan called for voluntary departures, around 200,000 Afghans left. The forced repatriation poses a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, already grappling with food insecurity, natural disasters, aid cuts, and limited relief groups.

Pakistan's election commission set 8 February 2024 for national elections, ending political uncertainty. This decision has economic significance in attracting foreign investment with reduced uncertainty. Though military leadership might have favored delaying elections to prevent the return of Imran Khan's party, economic pressures might have discouraged interference.

Concerns over the fairness of Pakistan's upcoming elections intensify as Fawad Chaudhry, a former ally of imprisoned ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan, is arrested, suggesting military intervention. Asad Umar, a top leader in Khan's party, resigns, echoing a trend of military-induced departures. These actions expose the military's efforts to undermine Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), a major political force, raising questions about electoral fairness. The developments highlight challenges to a level playing field in Pakistani politics, casting doubt on the integrity of the upcoming polls.

Sri Lanka

Competition for power and investments among countries has increased in Sri Lanka. In October, China agreed to [restructure a debt deal](#) with Sri Lanka worth USD 4.2 billion. After this, the country received [approval](#) for its second tranche of bailout funds from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Soon after the IMF announcement, the United States [announced](#) a USD 553 million project to build a deep-water shipping container terminal in Sri Lanka's Port of Colombo.

In late November, the government [announced its approval](#) to allow China's Sinopec to establish a new petroleum refinery plant at Hambantota port. All these projects are of significant importance to Sri Lanka regarding investment and to the respective partner countries regarding their strategic influence. New private investments from US firms have also been [reported](#) in Sri Lanka.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe announced the budget for 2024, [targeting](#) a budget deficit of 9.1 percent of GDP and projecting a total tax revenue of 4.1 million rupees. This is an ambitious target but necessary to keep the IMF bailout programme afloat. The Monetary Board has further [reduced](#) policy interest rates to stabilize inflation per the program requirements.

Being the ‘othered’ gender in South Asia

Maya Gurung, a 38-year-old transgender woman, and Surendra Pandey, a 27-year-old individual from Nepal, recently achieved a historic milestone as the first LGBTQ+ couple in South Asia to officially register their marriage. Their exuberance knows no bounds, expressing the desire to “scream to the world that we are husband and wife at last.” This landmark accomplishment follows more than two decades of struggle, sending a powerful message of change to the LGBTQ+ community across the subcontinent, which continues to grapple with a long history of marginalization and stigma.

In the colonial era, Britain imposed bans on homosexuality in its colonies, a legacy that persists in parts of Asia, Africa, and Oceania. Enze Han and Joseph O’Mahoney’s book, ‘British Colonialism and the Criminalisation of Homosexuality,’ attributes these laws to a “Victorian, Christian puritanical concept of sex.” The Orientalized view of Asia and the Middle East as overly erotic led to the introduction of these laws to protect soldiers from perceived deviations. The Indian Penal Code (IPC), formulated by British historian Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1862, remains influential, with Section 377 persisting in various forms in former British colonies like Pakistan, Singapore, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Brunei, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka.

Surprisingly, transgender, intersex, and third-gender identities have been integral to South Asian culture. In India, LGBTQ relationships are woven into literature, myths, and Hindu temple art, but the influence of the IPC has cast a shadow of embarrassment on these cultural facets.

Most South Asian countries criminalize same-sex conduct as “carnal intercourse against the order of nature,” with penalties ranging from short-term jail sentences to death. In December 2020, Bhutan amended its Penal Code to exclude homosexuality between adults from its scope. In 2018, India’s Supreme Court decriminalized gay sex. However, the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, adopting Sharia law, has escalated the punishment for same-sex sexual activity to death.

A 2013 Pew Research Survey in Pakistan and Bangladesh revealed that 90% and 67%, respectively, considered homosexual behavior morally wrong, while only 1% and 10%, respectively, deemed it morally acceptable. Reports in 2021 emphasized the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ communities in Pakistan and Bangladesh, with individuals compelled to hide their identities for safety.

The struggle for LGBTQ+ rights is dynamic and interconnected globally. Understanding South Asia’s position within this global landscape provides insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by the LGBTQ+ community in the region. Comparative data from other parts of the world, especially regions with progressive LGBTQ+ rights, can shed light on potential advocacy and policy reform pathways.

Efforts to protect the LGBTQ+ community in the subcontinent include Sri Lanka's government asserting at the UN Human Rights Council in 2014 that discrimination against LGBTQI individuals is unconstitutional. In Pakistan, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act was passed in May 2018, granting fundamental rights and prohibiting discrimination. Similarly, in December 2019, India's Parliament passed the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, addressing discrimination in education, health, employment, and accommodation.

Maya Gurung and Surendra Pandey's journey is a testament to the evolving landscape of LGBTQ+ rights in South Asia. Their historic union symbolizes personal triumph and resonates as a beacon of hope for a community that has faced societal adversity for far too long. While celebrating this milestone, it is crucial to recognize the systemic challenges that persist, rooted in historical legacies and deep-seated societal norms. The struggle for LGBTQ+ rights in South Asia is multifaceted, encompassing legal battles, societal attitudes, and cultural nuances. Despite the complexities of colonial-era legacies and prevailing discriminatory laws, Maya Gurung and Surendra Pandey's story reflects the resilience and determination of individuals seeking recognition and acceptance.

As South Asian countries grapple with the clash between tradition and progress, the global conversation around LGBTQ+ rights continues to evolve. The couple's joyous declaration of their marriage serves as an inspiration, echoing the possibility of change and acceptance. Nevertheless, it remains a call to action for societies to introspect, challenge discriminatory norms, and foster environments where individuals can embrace their identities without fear. Maya Gurung and Surendra Pandey's union represents a personal victory and a collective stride toward a more inclusive future. The narrative they weave is a powerful reminder that the journey toward LGBTQ+ equality is ongoing, requiring sustained efforts, advocacy, and understanding. In celebrating their marriage, we celebrate the potential for change, urging societies to progress towards acceptance.

TikTok Bans: Navigating the Intersection of Politics, Privacy, and Geopolitics

In November, the government of Nepal banned TikTok, a social media app with 2.2 million Nepali users, and consumed 40 percent of Nepal's internet bandwidth. The government has justified the ban on accounts of criticism about TikTok from a wide section of society, encouraging a tendency of hate speech and amid claims of disruption of social harmony, family structure, and family relations. The announcement comes after a new directive on the 'Operation of Social Networking' was released that mandates social media platforms to open liaison offices in Nepal. The decision has drawn flak from several sections of the society, marking it as a dent in digital rights and freedom of expression. Nepal is the second South Asian country that has banned TikTok in 2023. In April, the Taliban leadership had banned TikTok in Afghanistan, mentioning that the app was misleading the youth.

The debate over freedom of speech and expression, cybersecurity, and data concerns in social media platforms reflects the complex nature of the digital era. Governments are increasing pressure on social media companies to implement robust content moderation policies that can effectively curb the spread of harmful content without stifling free discourse. China, for instance, has one of the most comprehensive and strict censorship systems, the Great Firewall. Social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and X are banned in China.

While all social media platforms have been questioned over data privacy and security issues, TikTok's ownership by a Chinese company is the issue for the bans in most countries. TikTok has been at the center of geopolitical tensions, particularly between China and other countries. India banned it along with several other Chinese mobile applications in 2020, citing reasons for misuse of user data and the potential threat to the country's sovereignty. The ban was a broader move to reduce dependence on Chinese technology amid border disputes. Similarly, in the United States, there were concerns about the potential for the Chinese government to access user data through TikTok due to China's national security laws. Hence, TikTok has been banned on government devices inside the United States. Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, France, Netherlands, Norway, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom have taken similar measures.

Concerns about the content on TikTok leading to potential negative influences on society have also been raised by various countries. Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Indonesia have temporarily banned TikTok multiple times. However, the bans were typically lifted after assurances from the TikTok management regarding content moderation and user safety. These bans were often linked to concerns about the platform being used to share inappropriate or immoral content. In the case of Iran and Kyrgyzstan, these reasons have led to the complete ban of the app.

Nepal's case of banning TikTok combines social factors and, for the most part, political factors. Earlier this year, [reports](#) of the app being used for [live online gambling](#) and to [lure clients for sex massage](#) were released. However, the number of official cases lodged against TikTok has been [about 1600](#) in the past four years. With adequate technical resources, these cases should be addressable; however, Nepal's Cyber Bureau has [noted](#) that the absence of cybercrime laws, along with insufficient human resources, impair their capacity. When mapped in the political spectrum, Nepalis widely used TikTok and other social media apps to humiliate political leaders and highlight inefficiencies of the state. The fact that the ban was announced two days before the [antiestablishment protests](#) staged in the capital draws attention to the intentions of the ruling party. In the battle for democratic rights and the establishment's resolution, the judiciary has [sought written clarification](#) from the government regarding the ban on TikTok.

With the ban on TikTok, whether the government is testing the waters to exercise the same on other social media platforms or is trying to curb social malpractices is yet to be seen, but there are multifold impacts of this ban on Nepalis. Fifty-five percent of Nepali TikTok users used the app to research new products or brands, with 60 percent [making purchases](#) based on its content. It implies that many online businesses, mostly small businesses and individual content creators, will be hampered due to the ban. The ban has also resulted in users [installing free and unauthorized Virtual Private Networks](#) to change their location and use TikTok, increasing the risk of security breaches.

Countries' decision to ban TikTok stems from cultural, national security, political, and regulatory considerations. Nevertheless, a blanket ban on any social media app will only restrict access to valuable communication, information-sharing, and networking tools for individuals, businesses, and organizations that use these platforms for legitimate purposes. Rather, creating a regulatory framework that holds platforms accountable for data practices and content moderation is essential. Moreover, as technology advances, the responsibility to navigate these challenges lies not only with social media companies and governments but also with users who must remain informed, vigilant, and engaged in shaping the future of this global digital conversation.

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Nepal Institute for Policy Research (NIPoRe) is an independent and non-partisan research institute based in Kathmandu, Nepal. It works to generate evidence-based debates among citizens and critical development stakeholders in both the public and private sectors on contemporary policy issues from Nepal and other parts of Asia. The institution works on high policy priority areas through four research centres: the Center for New Economy and Inequality (CNEI), the Center for Strategic Affairs (CSA), the Center for Governance Studies (CGS), and the Center for Human Development (CHD). NIPoRe's team members represent diverse academic disciplines, professional backgrounds and geography. The institute adopts a multi-disciplinary approach in its analysis of policies and research, supported by researchers trained at universities and within professional environments across the globe. NIPoRe's key productions include the Nepal Competitiveness Index (NCI), the Nepal Risk Outlook (NRO), and the Diplomats' Forum.

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