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## **BHUTAN**

### **GENERAL**

Bhutan ('Druk Yul', land of the thunder dragon) is a small landlocked country in the Eastern Himalayas, having a border with Tibet in China in the north and with India in the south. The Bhutanese are under a million people (main ethnic groups being the Ngalops of the West, the Sharchops of the East, and the Lhotsampas of the South) with a very distinctive sense of identity and culture that is reinforced by its history and underlined by its geography. Notable events in Bhutanese history include the spread of Buddhism following on from the visit of Guru Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) in the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE/AD, and the unification of the country under a dual system of secular and religious administration ('Choesi Nyiden': with separation of religious and temporal rule under Je Khenpo and the Druk Desi respectively), instituted by the dynamic leader Zhabdrung Nagawang Namgyal who came from Tibet in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The effects of the European imperial-colonial endeavours that shook large parts of Asia in the subsequent centuries were tangential in Bhutan until the start of the twentieth century, a time when the Bhutanese monarchy was established with British support in 1907. This was the start of the Wangchuck dynasty, a remarkably stable form of royal government that saw only 4 changes of Kings in a period of a 100 years. The present King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck is the fifth dragon King ('Druk Gyalpo').

Recently, Bhutan has had a unique transition to democracy. There was no popular movement for democracy but the fourth King insistently handed down his powers – a paradox that elections to a parliamentary democracy were held when a referendum on the transition to democracy would have failed! At a time when democracy is facing some of its stiffest challenges in other parts of the globe, the Bhutanese have enacted a quiet democratic revolution.

There is an argument that the transition to democracy is not a rupture but an evolution of erstwhile governance mechanisms that had introduced decentralized and participatory decision making over the last few decades. The National Assembly was set up in 1953. The Royal Advisory Council was formed in 1967. Bhutan had its first five-year plan in 1961 and joined the UN in 1971. When the fourth king inherited the kingdom in 1972, he carried on the modernization and reforms initiated by his father. Bhutan introduced its own currency (the Ngultrum) in 1974 and in the subsequent decades, Bhutan's international relations have expanded. In 1981, the DYT's (District Development Committees) and in 1991 the GYT (Block development committees) were established, which gave local government a larger say.<sup>1</sup> The big change came in

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<sup>1</sup> On a separate note, the late 1980s and early 1990s were also marked by the 'southern problem', a conflictual situation involving the ethnically Nepalese immigrants in the south of the country some of whom (felt/were) discriminated against and targeted unfairly by immigration laws and census taking, and the cultural preservation policies such as the teaching of Dzongkha language in schools (instead of Nepali), and adherence to the Driglam Namzha, a historically significant code of social etiquette and behaviour. There is no originary ethnic conflict between the Nepalese and the Bhutanese, and in early

1998 the King dissolved the government and devolved power to a new executive council of ministers. In 1999, TV and Internet were allowed in Bhutan. In 2001, the Constitution drafting was initiated, and the draft Constitution underwent several revisions and public consultations. In 2005, the King stunned the nation with the announcement of a transition to democracy (parliamentary democracy with constitutional monarchy). While unaware, were the Bhutanese being groomed for democracy all along?

A year later in 2006 Jigme Singye Wangchuck (fourth King) abdicated his throne, handing power to his son the fifth and present King. In April and May 2007 mock elections were held in order to acquaint people with the details of elections. People were asked to choose from among 4 fictional parties – Druk Red, Druk Green, Druk Yellow and Druk Blue. An overwhelming number of people voted for the Druk Yellow party. Yellow is the colour of royalty and tradition; the people felt uncomfortable voting for anything else. This signified people's attitude towards the monarchy.

As a prelude to the elections, several pieces of legislation were enacted (e.g., Civil Societies Act), new organisations were set up (such as the Anti Corruption Commission or ACC, and the Election Commission of Bhutan or ECB), private media was allowed to function (radio and more significantly print media – newspapers like Bhutan Times and Bhutan Observer). Also, in the electoral rules, it was made clear that the political parties had to conduct a programme of nationwide 'familiarization', before actual 'campaigning' could begin. In these familiarisation tours, the idea was that the parties would educate people about democracy as a system in a non-partisan way. There was an extensive programme of voter education carried out robustly by the ACC and the ECB in tandem; on TV, radio and in print, people were alerted to the need to 'keep corruption out of politics', warned against coercion and bribery, and informed of their electoral rights and responsibilities.

The elections for the apolitical 25-seat National Council (upper house NC) were held in December 2007 and January 2008, electing 20 members to the house (the remaining 5 were the King's nominees announced in end March 2008); the NC candidate winning with the largest margin was a woman (Pema Lhamo from Zhemgang). On 24<sup>th</sup> March 2008, 79.4% of the total 318,465 registered voters, across the 47 constituencies spread over the 20 provinces (dzongkhags), cast their ballot by pressing the buttons on the EVMs (Electronic Voting Machines), some having taken bank loans to travel hundreds of kilometers to exercise their franchise. This led to the formation of the first ever democratically elected 47-seat National Assembly (lower house NA).

The people voted DPT (Druk Phuensum Tshogpa) into power in a way that could not fail to 'surprise and shock' the majority – it won 45 out of the 47 seats to the National Assembly! The uniform geographical spread of their victory was a validation of their

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1980s, incentives of up to 10000 Nu. were given by the Royal Government for intermarriage between Bhutanese of the North and the South. National integration is a key concern for a small country bordered by distinct and vast India and China; I would say Bhutan is one of the *states with status anxieties*.

appeal to the electorate of all the areas.<sup>2</sup> To quote a phrase from the national newspaper Kuensel (9/4/08), Bhutan had the “world’s smallest opposition, chosen by the electorate of the world’s youngest democracy”. The PDP (People’s Democratic Party) has 2 members in Parliament, one of whom is the leader of the opposition.

Jigmi Y. Thinley, the charismatic leader of the DPT, who has worked in the government for decades, is the new Prime Minister. The portfolios for the 11-member cabinet were announced in April, and the first house sitting was held in May 2008. The first session of the Parliament (due to end in late June 2008) has been debating the various articles of the Constitution prior to its adoption. Guided by the development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), which sees growth as a means to overall well-being, the government has its task cut out for it – delivering better services to a population with a small domestic market, infrastructure circumscribed by a difficult terrain, trade affected by landlocked status between two rising powers China and India that have different approaches to governance, and international relations conducted with aid-donor nations.

In such circumstances, caution is wisdom. Bhutan has not blindly emulated development elsewhere. The pace of modernization has not only been sufficiently slow to allow for adjustment and avoid massive upheavals, but modern trends are indigenised in various cases. The same is true in the cultural domain.

It is also worth noting that the public culture in Bhutan is not confrontational: something evident from the way in which party sympathizers did not display their political allegiances openly, or from the ECB rules in the televised campaign debates where the audience did not cheer or jeer (cheering a speaker might be construed as insulting the opponent). No doubt, some of this may change. Society will turn more litigious in the coming years.

The most significant contrast between Bhutan and other countries is in the nature of democracy and its relation to the electorate. I’ve discussed this elsewhere by differentiating the characteristics of ‘democracy as a right’ versus ‘democracy as a responsibility’. At the core of democracy as generally understood, lies a notion of participatory decision making coupled with symbolic representation in the mechanisms for the exercise of power. This is why democracy is seen as synonymous with people power in the political imagination. Bhutan does not fit into this mould. Participatory decision making or symbolic representation is not entirely new in Bhutan, people have generally debated issues in village ‘zomdus’ (meetings), and had their representatives speak on their behalf in the erstwhile National Assembly, the King himself symbolizes their collective persona. To the extent that ‘democracy as a right’ requires the people to actively desire such governance, and realize its worth, a majority of the Bhutanese people did not want a change of system. Monarchs, like stepmothers in fairy tales, are mostly cruel in the modernist imagination -- tyrants that deserve to be kicked out, or retain merely a figurehead role. Why then did the Bhutanese want to continue with their monarchy (even the most skeptical would have liked things to go on the way they are for another decade or so)?

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<sup>2</sup> Both parties had fielded Lhotsampa candidates roughly in proportion to their population, and both the NC and the NA have ethnically Nepalese members and there are also Ministers of Lhotsampa origin.

The main reasons are: firstly, because the Bhutanese people have seen unstable democracies in the region and around the world, where violence, strikes, sleaze, and politicking can make everyday life fairly miserable. The divisiveness of democracy is worrisome to them. This is not a case of government propaganda designed to keep people submissive, there are 30 international channels on the Bhutanese TV for almost a decade now (including several 24/7 news stations like BBC and CNN) and only one BBS (Bhutan Broadcasting Service) which runs a few hours every day. So they are aware of the alternatives, but they don't seem to like what they see elsewhere. Secondly, the state in Bhutan might be seen as a paternalistic one. Free education and healthcare is provided by the state, and until not so long ago, educated people had it easy in being able to get comfortable lifelong jobs of their choice in the civil services. While poverty is a fact of life in the rural areas, there isn't absolute starvation, partly due to community ties. Every Bhutanese had a right of final appeal to the King, and it was common for the landless to be granted land under the kidu (welfare) system. Things have been better than under numerous other democratic regimes. Hence, the Bhutanese reluctance to transition to a democracy can also be seen in terms of this fearful uncertainty of a new form of government and the anxiety about what it may bring; a Hamlet's logic of "rather bear those ills we have/ than fly to others we know not of".

The Bhutanese have been prevailed upon to accept 'democracy as a responsibility' – a 'gift' from the throne that the people must nurture. The stress has been on building a 'vibrant democracy' as the foundation of a strong economy. Voting was presented to the people as their 'sacred right', the vote being regarded as a 'norbu' or a precious jewel that must be exercised with care. The King even issued a Kasha (royal edict) before the Election Day exhorting people to exercise their franchise for the right reasons. What would be the salient characteristics of such a democracy that is inherited as a responsibility? It requires that the government focus on a better delivery in developmental, economic and social terms. People will have high expectations of the new system that they have been persuaded to adopt, and there are equally strong chances of disillusionment, should the promises fail to materialise. Accordingly, local issues will be important. In particular, this means livelihood concerns like the distance of settlements from the nearest road-head (relevant in getting agricultural produce to the markets), maintenance of water channels, lhakhangs (temples) and mule tracks, increased rural electrification, crop insurance and so on. In urban areas, the challenge is greater, both in getting people to care about their democracy as a responsibility, and also in the government having to make progress on long standing problems such as solid waste disposal issues (a 1993 landfill site near the capital Thimphu with 8 metric ton/day capacity for 10 years still used today with 35 metric tons/day waste), dealing with stray dogs, dust pollution from increasing construction, rising forest fires. These are specific problems that affect the lives of urban dwellers in addition to the more universal problems like unemployment and rural-urban migration which will be addressed in the tenth five year plan commencing this year.

In the years ahead, what will be most interesting is how the Bhutanese national interest will come to be defined under the new governance system of parliamentary democracy. This 'national interest' may coalesce around the crucial categories of sovereignty, economy, environment, and accordingly policies will focus on reducing aid dependence by diversifying the economy, curbing corruption especially in the construction industry where it is most rampant, lowering unemployment amongst

urban youth, revenue generation by development of private sector enterprises, wisely utilizing resources such as hydropower and promoting commerce where Bhutanese goods and services have a niche market.

### **SPECIFIC**

1. What set of economic, demographic, social, or geopolitical factors interacted to destabilize the monarchy?

And

2. What set of more immediate factors precipitated crisis in the monarchy?

The monarchy in Bhutan has not been ‘destabilized’, nor has there been a ‘crisis’. The transition to parliamentary democracy is accompanied by a constitutional monarchy. The monarch remains the supreme commander of the armed forces. People would prefer to retain the monarchy, and the status of the monarchy has been consolidated with the recent changes.

Being a very small Kingdom, Bhutan has taken note of the developments within, in the region, and beyond. As for factors that may have had some bearing on the changes in Bhutan – (a) there is the ‘contagion effect’ from the neighbours. All of Bhutan’s neighbouring areas have been unstable to some degree, and some recent developments, such as the extreme political trajectory in Nepal to the west, the restive situation in Tibet, alongwith China’s road building in the north, the activities of anti-Indian insurgent groups in the south (which led eventually to the Bhutanese military initiative against them in December 2003), have been challenging. (b) there is the ‘moral hazard’ of a monarchic rule that is more benevolent than extractive. In other words, the knowledge that there is a last resort in the monarch’s welfare responsibility for the people may actually negatively affect private initiative and entrepreneurship, and perpetuate a paternalistic and dependent relationship between the ruler and the ruled, that may be difficult to sustain at the same level in the future for realistic considerations. (c) wider exposure to the world through television and internet must have a significant impact on the population, especially the younger generation at home and the affluent youth who have studied abroad with experience of other systems of government. Increasing educational achievements (in part due to the government’s serious focus on education) and increasing prosperity are concomitant with greater desire to participate in decision-making and norm-formulation. (d) Sovereignty and the ability to dictate favourable terms is a critical consideration for a geo-strategically landlocked small state with hydropower resources located between two emerging energy deficient powers; being democratic (especially in light of the re-negotiated Indo-Bhutanese friendship treaty) is an enabling factor in such circumstances. With thawing relations between its large neighbours, Bhutan has the opportunity to emerge as an international actor in its own right, something more viable as a democracy. (e) The challenges of growth, development and the environment within the framework of the GNH philosophy can be best met with better accountability in certain sectors of the economy (e.g., construction), and better information flow for increased transparency, to avoid ‘co-ordination problems’ and ‘principal-agent’ type of issues (where the incentives are not compatible for various actors in a situation). (f) Finally, in light of the unique transition in Bhutan, the role of

the enlightened monarchs must be emphasised. It is almost a truism that power is never willingly given away by rulers, but the astute foresight of the monarchy has brought about a transition in a manner best suited to the country and its future.

3. Did elite divisions within the monarchy play a major role in the transition?

and

4. Did mass mobilization against the monarchy play a major role?

and

5. Did violence play a major role? Why or why not?

Being a very small society, especially in the urban and elite context, people are often related to each other through overlapping kinship and ownership ties.

According to the rules of the transition – people standing for elections had to give up any government post before contesting as a candidate; there was an overly scrupulous emphasis on ‘free and fair’, to the extent that the candidates could not publicly mention their previous honours (such as being granted the red scarf by the King) when addressing the electorate. Religion and royalty were not allowed to be a part of the elections (e.g., the monks and the Kings could not even vote). The leader of the opposition party, PDP which lost badly – Sangay Ngedup – was the brother of the Queens (there are four), and another brother stood for a seat from one of constituencies in the capital city; they had to relinquish their status before entering the political fray, and they did, but both of them lost their seats. At the same time, the party that won, DPT, was definitely also a party that stood for the principles espoused by the King (it was called ‘royalist’ in some sections of the international press), so there was no line dividing the two parties when it came to alignment with the monarchy.

Certainly, mass mobilisation against the monarchy played no role in the transition within the country. Quite the contrary, sections of people appealed to the monarch to restore monarchy, after the results were announced. Earlier, the Kings travelled around the country to try and convince the people of the value of democracy, and the fourth King made sure that the Constitution had a 65-year retirement age limit for any future King (another interesting feature was the Constitution committing 60% of land in the country to forest cover in perpetuity). Bhutan is rather a case of a ‘salmon transition’ in that it goes against all the accepted wisdom (like the upstream swimming salmon) about monarchies and democratic transitions. Exactly a hundred years after the monarchy being established (not by divine right, but the ‘genja’ or right to rule was signed by general agreement), the power has been redirected to the people, where it once originated (perhaps another salmon parallel, for folklore has it that they return to where they were born to spawn)!

Violence did not play a major role in the transition. There were a few very low-intensity bomb blasts in the period January to March 2008 (four blasts on 20 January, one each on 3 February, 13 March, 15 March, 17 March – in all together, there was 1 person dead), some forest fires that may have been due to arson (Kuensel), and also apprehension of Maoists in the south by the Bhutan police (BBC news). The election observation mission of the EU also termed the transition peaceful. The main reasons for this could be because – (a) the transition was felt to be happening ‘ahead of time’, and not ‘inevitable’, so there was not the kind of politicisation that leads to violence, democratic transition might even have pre-empted and negated possibility of violence

in the future. (b) the restraining effect of a Buddhist ethos, and the behavioural self-censorship that is bound to exist in a small society with necessity of repeated interaction with the same sets of people (c) the negative association of democracy with violence in the public imagination in Bhutan, or equally, the positive self-perception and powerful narrative of the Bhutanese being peaceful and different, thus unique.

6. Did the collapse or crisis in the monarchy lead to democracy or a new form of autocracy? Explain the outcome.

And

7. What role if any did international actors play in either undermining autocracy or facilitating/impeding a democratic transition?

The transition has led to a uniquely Bhutanese democracy. An important issue that the media within the country brought up after the election results were announced was the scale of the victory – DPT had an overwhelming majority, so that the role of the opposition in a conventional sense is questionable. This is partly a feature of the first past the post system also, whereby the PDP having won roughly about thirty percent of the vote across the country got only 2 seats (out of 47), compared to a much lower percentage vote-per-seat ratio for the winning party, DPT. The DPT has promised to act accountably and be its own opposition. Several theories have been floated in the Bhutanese media about the swaying factor in the results, from the influence of the bureaucrats, to the influence of mobile phones, and also the negative campaigning of the DPT which focused on the problems of ill-governed democracies more than the positive aspect of democratic rule (Bhutan Times).

In any case, the transition was deliberate and slow, well planned, and laid over with institutional mechanisms that allowed the governance and polity to come to terms with problems incrementally. Institutional set up and learning was taken very seriously, with decisions about vote entitlement changed at the highest level when they were found to be inadequate to voter needs (postal ballot was extended to tourist industry staff in a volte-face of earlier ECB decisions, when it was found that the timing of the Paro tsechu/festival would make it very difficult for tourism employees to return to their provinces to vote).

The international actors have largely facilitated and supported the transition to democracy. India's role is significant in this regard. The EVMs came from India, and so did a lot of election expertise. The Indian Prime Minister visited the country shortly after the government was formed, and addressed the first joint session of the newly elected Parliament (on May 19<sup>th</sup>) committing among other things a 100 billion rupees bilateral engagement package for the duration of the 10<sup>th</sup> five year plan which begins this year, and a proposed rail link (to mark the Golden Jubilee of the visit of first Indian PM Nehru's visit to Bhutan in 1958) to connect the main commercial Bhutanese border town in the south, Phuentsholing. This visit showcased the positive relations between the two countries (standing by each other), and it might dampen the efforts of other countries to 'use' their engagement with Bhutan to India's disadvantage.

The other international actors have also been equally supportive of Bhutan's democratic transition. UN was involved in capacity building for democracy, and the



other bilateral international development-partners that function in Bhutan were also keen about the move for better access and terms of operation. There was provision of infrastructure and technology, and training for media. In general, Bhutan has a strong ownership of its development and transition agenda and any external involvement is not indiscriminate but targeted and chosen in line with Bhutanese priorities.

## **OVERALL**

When the prior regime type to a democracy is a monarchy – certain aspects are taken for granted, these did not necessarily hold in the case of Bhutan. The transition was initiated by the monarch, resisted by the people, accompanied by institutional reforms, and accomplished peacefully. A case of what one might call ‘salmon democracy’ for its unique aspects.

The monarch continues to retain respect and status, albeit with reduced scope of power and responsibility. The advantages of enlightened leadership in bringing about such a transition must be stressed.

In addition to seeing democracy in Bhutan as a responsibility (as opposed to a right), democracy in Bhutan can also be seen in the following ways – (a) As Integrative Social Therapy, it was a way of bringing the urban leaders in touch with the common people in remote and rural places, to enable improvement in their lives and alleviate suffering. (b) As Emergent from Context, it was learning by doing the first time around, the slow process of change was a blessing in disguise for it meant taking lessons from bad examples elsewhere. (c) As a Holistic Development Exercise, the candidates had to do extensive research in constituencies, prepare detailed reports, set priorities, and will be held to account. (d) As an Investment in Public Empowerment, through the high costs to individual people of going to vote which will mean a greater demand for accountability in governance, and through bringing issues of representation to the fore, in particular themes of gender and youth.

While this may be a textbook case of how a transition should be carried out, the factors involved are certainly not universal – these include a deeply held and cherished faith in monarchy, a small population, no history of conflict with private sector, geographical isolation in mountainous terrain, an early formation of a continuous symbolic and lived identity (Driglam Namzha dates to 16<sup>th</sup> century, the time of the Zhabdrung, and so does the extensive system of fortification or the Dzongs) consolidated over time through the dual system of governance, which kept religious and secular centres of power separate. Moreover, what I’d call the ‘democratic compact’ is as yet incompletely formulated at several sections of the society (e.g., rural), or, that the formalisation of expectations arising from a representative system is not complete and the distinguishing of civic versus royal patronage will take time.

Nonetheless, much can be learnt from the gradualist voluntarist model of transition which is especially apt for small, reasonably homogenous places. (a) it is a good role model for other intra-national political set-ups, viz., the way in which the institutions were set up, and the rules were formulated to ensure eligibility in strict terms. (b)

more importantly, it is a way forward possibly for faith-based societies. Let me explain.

In societies and countries that have fairly clearly defined alternative traditions of great reverence (be it the particular monarchy in Bhutan or certain faiths such as Islam in other places) and where these traditions exert a strong influence over the people, the way towards democracy does not, and should not, lie in espousing a universalist formula that is adopted wholesale from abroad. As the case of Bhutan shows – voting could be presented to the people as their ‘sacred right’, the vote could be presented as a ‘norbu’ or a ‘precious jewel’, democracy could be presented as a ‘responsibility’ – when the universal democratic precepts are ‘home grown’ and nurtured within the language of reverence already available within a country or society (it could be a religion or other kinds of faith-derived language elsewhere), the results are more meaningful to the people, and more effective in securing a peaceful transition that is amenable to everyone involved and makes them feel and belong integrally to the process.

The ability to visualise such kinds of democratic possibilities is crucial in order to have systems of governance that promote the fullest and most free realisation of the individuals involved, and also bind best with the ideals that the people hold dear. Such a kind of thinking on democracy that relies upon building its own vocabulary of faith as a means to change for the better, will involve context-specific translations of democracy and imaginative study of the politics of faith/reverence based behaviour.

Finally, democratic transition in Bhutan has been an essential part of a nation-building exercise. The goal of ‘One Nation, One Vision’ (as opposed to the slogan ‘One Nation, One People’ of an earlier era) outlined by the fifth King – and spelt out in terms of the ‘vibrant democracy’ with a ‘strong economy’, and the role of the youth (‘future generations’) in bringing this about – is actualised by creating a sense of national identity (for Bhutan and for individual Bhutanese) to which democracy can contribute substantially.

The evolving political culture, narratives of historical trajectories, internal and external socio-economic dynamics will all shape governance expectations and people’s participation in the new Bhutanese democracy. Bhutan’s case shows that monarchies can meaningfully transition to democracy, and are able to do so with foresight and without inevitability.