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with Democracy**

ABU NASAR SAIED AHMED



Banikanta Kakati Research Institute
Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University
Guwahati • Assam

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Occasional Paper/2018/03
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This BKRI series has been published by :
The Registrar

Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University

Headquarters: Patgaon, Rani Gate, P.O.: Azara, Guwahati – 781017

*City Centre : Housefed Complex, Dispur Last Gate, P.O.: Assam Sachivalaya, Dispur,
Guwahati – 781006*

Assam, INDIA.

Web: www.kkhsou.in/web

Date of First Publication: January, 2018.

© KKHSOU, 2018.

Price: Rs. 100.00 (INR), \$ 50.00 (USD)

Banikanta Kakati Research Institute
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Printed at: S S Graphics, Guwahati

BHUTAN'S EXPERIMENTS WITH DEMOCRACY

Abstract

Bhutan is one of the four neighbours of India's North East. It ruled by a monarch with unlimited power till 2008, when through nation-wide democratic elections the people facilitated a remarkably peaceful transition from absolute monarchy to a constitutional one. The article tries to underscore the processes and developments of Bhutan's experiments with democracy. As the new democracy moves forward to go for the third national elections in 2018, it is evident that the 'King's Gift' has been well-taken by the people in letter and spirit, marking the success of king's experiments with democracy.

Keywords

Monarchy in Bhutan, decentralisation of power, new constitution, party system, elections, consolidation of democracy

Introduction

The Kingdom of Bhutan (27.30N' and 90.30E') is a land-locked country, located in the eastern Himalayas between China to the north, and India to the south. It shares its international boundary of 477 kilometres with the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, and approximately 659 kilometres with the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, West Bengal and Sikkim. Its geographical area is approximately 46,500 square kilometres, and it has a population of about 764,000. Bhutan is 150 m (its lowest point) above sea level on the Indian border and has a rich and diverse climate consisting of dense forests, subtropical climates, temperate zones, snow-capped mountains; the highest of which is Gangkar Punsum (7,497 m). Adding to the topographical differences are the ravines created by seven large and powerful rivers, flowing through the Himalayan ranges from north to south. The natural physical barriers of Bhutan limit the development of infrastructure, and easy movement of people, leading to a sense of isolation from the rest of the world.

The history of Bhutan may be traced back to the mid-17th century when Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1651), the first Zhabdrung Rinpoche¹, founded the kingdom. In subsequent centuries, a dual system of government continued, under which the king, as the Druk Desi, used to take care of

civil administration, while the Je Khenpo acted as the religious leader. With the emergence of the unified House of Wangchuck in 1907, the king assumed absolute power, relegating the sacerdotal domain a lesser position. With the institutionalisation of monarchy, the successive monarchs initiated a smooth process of modernisation, development and democratisation².

Unique transition to democracy

It is well-known that the third king (Druk Gyalpo) Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, (1952-1972) initiated the process of democratic institutionalisation by taking certain revolutionary steps. Such initiatives were not the result of any demand or pressure from any quarters. By a royal decree, he established the National Assembly (Tshogdu) in 1953, initially as a unicameral parliament. Towards the end of his rule, in 1971 he empowered the National Assembly to remove him, or any of his successors by a two-thirds majority. With the agenda of modernisation in Bhutan, the king introduced five-year plans with the objective of development of road infrastructure in the country thus, paving the way for enhancement of trade and economic opportunities. Over the years, since the turn of the present century, the kingdom witnessed a visible improvement in the economy, education and health sectors³. Bhutan extended its international linkages by becoming the 128th member of the United Nations on September 21, 1971, which indeed added credibility to its stature.

Among the notable initiatives taken by the third king were- the separation of powers, introduction of the office of Prime Minister (Longchen), and his unilateral relinquishment in 1968 of the right to veto any act or decision of the National Assembly. These initiatives provided a solid background to his successor (his son), Jigme Singhe Wangchuck to consolidate the gains of the political reforms, and to transform the kingdom from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional form of government of the British Westminster's mould.

His successor Jigme Singhe Wangchuck, the fourth king, ascended the throne in 1972 at the age of 17 years. He demonstrated his strong commitment towards the welfare of his people and the country by taking decisive steps towards modernisation, and most importantly, the institutionalisation of democracy, despite his early actions to reintroduce his absolute power to veto any bill or move by the National Assembly. He proceeded steadily, taking the thread left behind by his father with admirable foresight by introducing a democratic culture in a country (a staunch follower of Mahayana Buddhism), which was yet to be acquainted with the basics of political modernisation and democratic

ethos. The people were accustomed to the Bhutanisation policy started by the king in the 1960s which included the enforcement of a national dress code to be followed while entering any public premises, and the imposition of Dzongkha as the national dress.

New ideas and developments were unfolding at the initiative of the king. However, a series of shockwaves stunned the people, when the king stepped down as the head of the government in July 1998, and introduced a provision to enable the National Assembly to pass a vote of no-confidence against the king by one-third majority, upon which the king had to step down in favour of the crown prince, or the next in line of succession. He surprised the people and the rest of the world in December 2006 by abdicating the throne for his eldest son Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, thus firmly institutionalising constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy. The fifth king was crowned in November 2008, seven months after the first democratic party-based elections were held in March 2008. This is why the transformation of Bhutan into a democracy is known as “king’s gift”. Others comment, “Bhutan’s democratic journey began from the palace” because the people did not raise such demands.

The beginning of a determined process

In order to create an environment of democratic culture, the fourth king created two new institutions during the period 1976-1981 to ensure decentralisation of the decision-making process, and to facilitate people’s participation in administration and governance. These two institutions, set up in twenty districts (dzongkhag) are- Dzongkhag Yargye Tshogchung (DYT), and Gewog⁴ Yargye Tshogchung (GYT)⁵. The DYT was constituted with 20 to 60 members comprising the governor (dzongdag) of the district, the administrative heads of the different departments of the district, the local National Assembly members (chimis), and the gups (headmen) of villages. In other words, the DYT is a non-elective body, as ex-officio members constitute it.

On the other hand, the GYT at the village level is an elective body. The basic objective behind the creation of this village level institution was to familiarise the people with the art of administration and self-governance. These were elected bodies (of three-year duration), which provided the people with a unique opportunity to articulate at the grassroots level their problems and to find ways and means for a solution.

These initiatives could be considered as a preface to further developments towards democratisation in a bigger scale, which till 1998 was almost unthinkable, not because of any royal opposition but, paradoxically enough, because the Bhutanese themselves never talked about it. On June

10, 1998, the king made a royal decree (kasho), entrusting the executive power to the cabinet, to be constituted by ministers directly elected by the people. It was undoubtedly the most revolutionary change in the government since the fourth king took over in 1972. Transfer of royal power to the elected cabinet was a clear indication of a gradual process towards democratisation. It is interesting to note that the Assembly did not like this move, fearing that the introduction of an elective parliamentary system would eventually do away with the tradition of non-elective and hereditary positions, bestowed by the royal order.

Under the newly enforced GYT Act of 2002, the gup elections were held in November 2002, in 199 of 201 gewongs, under the principle of the universal adult franchise for the first time. With a few hiccups, for example, many voters were not able to cast a vote as they were unable to show their identity cards at the polling booth, which reduced the percentage of turnout; the 2002 elections could be considered a milestone in Bhutan's experiments with democracy, initiated by the king. A large number of voters walked several kilometres to reach the polling booth to taste their first experience of participating in democratically held elections. The shortcomings of the elections finally prompted the government to constitute the Election Commission on December 2005, which was formally inaugurated on January 16, 2006. It was a major step towards institutionalisation of the electoral process, holding of free and fair elections, and setting up of polling stations.

It must be mentioned that the Election Commission faced certain difficulties. The first struggle was regarding the question as to how to enlighten the citizens about various dynamics of election politics, which demands the existence of a multiparty system. Other issues were related to the selection of candidates to contest the elections, the act of voting, and finally electing a party to run the government. Another crisis was regarding the registration of the voters, who were expected to cast their votes in the proposed 2008 national elections. For a country having no experience of democratic elections, these appeared to be gigantic tasks. However, the Election Commission was able to complete the process, and by March 2008, when the elections were held, the total number of registered voters was 318,465.

Framing the Constitution

One of the most daunting tasks before the fourth king of Bhutan at the turn of the present century was regarding the drafting of the constitution. He issued a royal decree on September 4, 2001, to the effect that his country should have a written constitution. A drafting committee, headed by Chief Justice Sonam Tobgay, and comprising 39 other members

were appointed for the purpose. Overcoming several difficulties, such as, shaping the relationship between the king and the elected cabinet, handling of the controversial issue of moving a no-confidence motion in the parliament against the monarch, empowerment of the local self-governing institutions at the grassroots level, and sorting of the question of role of Buddhism, and the Central Monk Body in the political system of the democratic Bhutan; the mission was finally accomplished. The drafting committee did a stupendous job by holding consultations with several stakeholders, including the functionaries of twenty dzongkhags, media persons and government officials. The king himself toured the length and breadth of the country, directly talked to the people about the salient features of the constitution, and solicited their comments and criticism, so that it could be treated as an embodiment of the popular will. The ingenious effort of the king was well-received, as the people assembled in different parts of the country to listen to him, and offer their comments and suggestions. Thus, the constitution reflected their vision and aspirations. All these exercises led to three revisions, and at the end of the day, the constitution was released for public discussion in August 2006.

In December 2006, the fourth king Jigme Singye Wangchuck announced his decision of abdication of the throne in favour of his eldest son, Jigme Khesar Namgyel, perhaps to allow the new generation to take over the new constitutional arrangement.⁶ The commitment of the new and young king to build up a vibrant country could be seen in his statement made soon after the transfer of power. He said:

To fulfil the aspirations of the Bhutanese, we all must first build a strong and dynamic economy. In doing so, the Bhutanese people must remember that as a landlocked nation with a small population, it is vital to work harder". "For our small kingdom excellence must be the only standard."⁷

The new king postponed the coronation, although he assumed the power and position of the monarchy, not merely as a symbolic gesture and continuity of the power structure, but as a mark of peaceful, and orderly transfer of power in a newly emerging democracy. The priority of the new monarch was to conduct the general elections, scheduled for March, efficiently. After the successful completion of the elections, his coronation took place on November 6, 2008, marking 100 years of monarchy in Bhutan.⁸

Building the party system

The announcement of the March 2008 elections ushered enthusiasm among the political aspirants. The Bhutan National Party (first political

party), formed in 1950, is now defunct. Other parties, formed at the initiative of the Lhotshampa community in the 1990s in the backdrop of its conflict with the monarchy, were banned, and thus, were non-existent. At the time of the inauguration of the Constitution, there was not a single registered political party. As the king created an environment conducive for the introduction of democratic institutions, four 'dummy' parties came up, bearing four colours and representing certain values. These are Druk Blue Party, Druk Green Party, Druk Red Party, and Druk Yellow Party; representing accountability and justice, environment and conservation, development and conservation, and traditional values, respectively. They lined up to participate in the mock elections, scheduled for April 2007. Two of the most popular parties, judging from the percentage of votes polled in the said elections, was allowed to contest in the general elections for the National Assembly to be held in March 2008. Eventually, in the 'mock elections' held on April 21, 2007, the Druk Yellow Party secured 44.3 per cent votes, while the Druk Red Party 20.38 percent. The other parties were eliminated from the elections to be held in March 2008.

Table 1.1

Results of the mock elections in Bhutan

Parties	Votes	%
Druk Yellow Party	55,263	44.30
Druk Red Party	25,423	20.38
Druk Blue Party	25,293	20.28
Druk Green Party	18,766	15.04

Source : Election Commission of Bhutan

A second round of the mock elections was held 37 days later on May 28, in which the turnout of voters was 66 percent, i.e., 26 percent higher than that of the first round. The Druk Yellow party won in 46 out of 47 constituencies. This exercise could be considered as a big leap in respect of the forthcoming general elections scheduled for March 2008.

All this paved the way for the formation of political parties in Bhutan. The initiative in this direction was taken by Sangay Ngedup⁹ (former Prime Minister). The People's Democratic Party was formed under the leadership of Ngedup on August 6 and was registered by the Election Commission on September 1, 2007, after three weeks of its application for registration.¹⁰ Simultaneously, the Druk Pheunsum Tshogpa (Peace and Prosperity) Party was formed on August 25, after the merger of the All People's Party, and the Bhutan People's United Party after the election

of Jigme Yoezer Thinley, another Prime Minister¹¹, as its President on August 15, 2007. It was registered on October 2, and thus became the second recognised party of Bhutan. This was the preface to the party-based democratic elections of Bhutan.

Consolidation of democracy

Before the scheduled elections of March 2008, the elections for the 25 member National Council, the Upper House were held on December 31, 2007 (after a delay of four days). At that point of time there were 312,817 registered voters, spread over 20 dzongkhags (districts). They were sensitised about the principles, and practices of the universal adult franchise. It was a newly constituted body in which 20 members were elected directly by 312,817 registered voters. Meanwhile, the party system emerged in an informal way, since the parties did not apply for registration under the Election Commission of Bhutan. Four newly constituted political parties were ready to contest in the National Council elections. The Election Commission held elections in 15 districts, but five were left out due to the unwillingness of the candidates to contest. Only one candidate came forward, but the number was inadequate to hold the elections. However, a second round was held on January 29, 2008. It was another warm-up exercise, which encouraged the voters to prepare themselves for the forthcoming bigger event. The elections for the National Council provided an opportunity for the voters to get familiarised with the electoral process. Four parties contested the elections. The Druk Phuensum Tshogpa secured 44.52 percent votes and was well ahead of the People's Democratic Party, which secured 32.53 percent votes (Table 1.2). At that point of time, the contesting parties were not registered under the Election Commission of Bhutan. The March elections and the roundup in May might be regarded as a part of the royal experiments with democratic initiative, and as an attempt to monitor popular response.

Table 1.2

Results of the 2008 elections to the National Council of Bhutan

Parties	Votes polled	% votes
Druk Phuensum Tshogpa	93949	44.52
People's Democratic Party	68650	32.52
Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa	35962	17.04
Druk Chirwang Tshogpa	12457	5.90

Source: Election Commission of Bhutan

The two political parties, People's Democratic Party and Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa, qualified to contest in the 2008 Assembly elections (determined by the percentage of their vote share), but had not yet applied for registration. They started the process of getting themselves registered in August 2007, and both were formally registered by October 2007. It is noteworthy that the competition during the campaigning process for the National Council was between these two parties; the third party, i.e., Druk Chirwang Tshogpa virtually remained a non-entity. The campaigns were marked by a high level of civility and, mutual respect maintained by the opponents towards each other. Their focus was on following the respective party ideologies and dealing with the issues raised in their respective manifestos. It was remarkable to see that the voters showed enthusiasm by lining up in the election booth to exercise their right to franchise. It appeared that the elections to the National Council served the purpose of educating the voters about the new lessons of participatory democracy, and power of the electorate.

As the elections to the National Council was completed with an expected degree of success, the process for holding the first democratic elections to the National Assembly scheduled for March 24, 2008, started with utmost care and caution. The new king remained steadfast in implementing his father's dream to transform the country from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional form of government on the lines of Westminster's mould, and therefore, the process received immense support and attention from the administration. The level of popular participation in the first national elections was indeed a remarkable achievement; despite four bomb blast in Bhutan, including the capital city Thimphu, on January 28, 2008¹². The general mood of the people was in favour of strengthening democracy in the interests of the future of Bhutan. The royal government of Bhutan left no stone unturned to ensure a high turnout of voters, which yielded desired results. The turnout was 79.4 percent. As many as 235,893 registered voters exercised their franchise in person in 865 polling stations. The number of voters using postal ballots was also quite significant. Forty-two foreign and 52 national observers monitored the elections. They took stock of the historic event in all the twenty dzongkhags.

The grace and dignity shown by the candidates and parties in the National Council elections was the hallmark of the first democratic elections held in Bhutan. The initial forecast suggested that the PDP would win with a narrow margin at the end of a neck-to-neck competition. But that did not happen. The DPT outsmarted the favourite PDP by securing 67.1 per cent votes and capturing 45 seats, while PDP secured 32.9 per cent votes and only two seats. The PDP President, Sangay Ngedup, tendered

resignation, taking full moral responsibility for the defeat of the party. Soon after the results, the leaders of both the parties expressed their commitment to work for the consolidation of democratic gains achieved through electoral processes, and for the realisation of the king's dream to work in the pursuit of 'Gross National Happiness.'

It is relevant to state that as the role of Buddhism as a religion of the people of Bhutan, the popular perception about the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) is extremely dear to the common masses. The term was coined and popularised by the fourth king Jigme Singye Wangchuck in the late 1980s. The king put more emphasis on the efforts to achieve GNH, and not on other economic measurements and indices.¹² The smooth conduct of the two elections within a short period, one for the National Council and the other National Assembly; and the peaceful nature of campaign have certainly something to do with Buddhism-reflective of an enlightened Bhutanese society. The tendency towards the consolidation of democracy and the environment conducive to the nourishment of GNH has been further reinforced in the successful completion of the second National Assembly elections in 2013.

It is mandatory to reconstitute the National Assembly within 90 days of the expiry of its current term. The term of the first elected National Assembly expired on April 20, 2013, which meant that elections for the new body had to take place on July 20. Accordingly, the elections were held in two rounds. In the first round, held on May 31, 2013; four parties contested in 20 Dzongkhags, in which the ruling DPT secured 44.52 per cent votes, while the opposition PDP 32.53 percent (Table 1.3). Accordingly, these two parties contested in the second round of elections held on July 13, 2013.

Table 1.3

Results of the National Elections, 2013

Parties	First round		Second round			
	Votes	%	Votes	%	Seats	+/-
DPT	93,949	44.52	114,093	45.12	15	-30
PDP	68,650	32.53	138,760	54.88	32	+30
Drul Nyamrup Tshogpa	35,962	17.04				
Druk Chirwang Tshogpa	12,457	5.90				
Total	211,018	100	252,853	100	47	0
Voters turnout	381,790	55.27	381,790	66.23	-	-

Source: Election Commission of Bhutan

The result of the 2013 elections diminished the expectations of the ruling DPT. The opposition PDP bagged 32 of 47 seats defeating its rival party, which was known to have been in the good books of the king. The DPT had to remain to contend with 12 seats. The win for the PDP was remarkable. In the first round, the DPT was ahead of the PDP by 11.99 percent. But, in less than two months the PDP turned the table to its side. Five years back, it was only able to secure only two seats, despite the fact that its vote share was 32.9 percent. The results of the second round of elections in July 2013 suggested that the people of Bhutan had learnt the art of changing the government, and experimenting with the other party, thus, rejecting the tendency towards one-party domination.

The road ahead

In 2008, there were people in and outside Bhutan who were sceptical of the success of the experiment with king's gift. Two general elections have disabused such a miscalculation. In a decade of its experiments, Bhutan has emerged as a constitutional monarchy, despite its reluctance to accord full freedom of expression and democratic opposition to western mould. A new democracy has certain compulsions that make its power elite to delimit the range of tenets of freedom and liberty – institutional, personal and societal – to move cautiously so that freedom not put under 'reasonable restrictions' might throw the country into chaos and disarray. It will be interesting to see how far the process of consolidation of democracy and institutions takes place in Bhutan in the post-2018 era after the completion of the third National Assembly elections. With the experience of smooth experimentation with the democratic processes for two decades, people are now confidently well-settled with their Westminster type of parliamentary democracy in which the monarch has become a constitutional figurehead and real power has been transferred to the people in a remarkably peaceful way. The representatives of the people of this nation appear to be more responsible than many of the parliamentarians elsewhere. The electoral authorities of Bhutan imposed a university degree as the minimum qualification criteria for the candidates to contest in parliamentary elections. As a result, both the National Assembly and the National Council have representatives, having university degrees. A majority of the candidates in the 2007 elections to the National Council and the National Assembly were in their 30s.¹³ This made both houses of the parliament the assemblies of qualified and young persons. Despite the fact that Bhutan is a Buddhist state, and Article 3 (1) of the Constitution ordains that "Buddhism is the spiritual heritage of Bhutan, which promotes the principles and values of peace, non-violence and compassion", religious institutions and personalities are considered to "remain above politics". In other

words, the separation of religion and politics has been institutionalised, undoubtedly a welcome constitutional measure that needs to be appreciated.

The 'gift' of the fourth king of Bhutan has been accepted by the people with a high degree of maturity and calmness, without much celebration. Just as the king travelled the length and breadth of his kingdom in relentlessly persuading the more or less reluctant people to support his efforts towards transforming Bhutan into a democracy were unusually remarkable, the popular response to the landmark reform was also a stupendous feat. The process and consolidation of democracy started in 1972 and vigorously pushed through since 2008 is holding and ushering a new hope for peace, and progress in this comparatively small Himalayan nation.

Notes and references

1. The House of Wangchuck denotes the Royal Wangchuck family. Prior to 1907, when the unification took place, the Wangchuck family had ruled the district of Trongsa. The family under the leadership of Ugyen Wangchuck (1861-1926), the first king, who ruled during 1907-1926, unified the country with the British support and assumed the position of Druk Gyalpo (Dragon King).
2. Marian Gallenkamp, *Democracy in Bhutan: An Analysis of Constitutional Change in a Buddhist Monarchy*, IPCS Research Paper (New Delhi: Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2010) p. 2.
3. For details on the improvement in education in terms of enrolment, decline in school dropouts, health (decline in infant and maternal mortality rate) in economy (increase in per capita income and GDP) see *Bhutan National Development Report 2011: Sustaining Progress* (UNDP)
4. Bhutan at present has 205 Gewongs (villages), and each has an average area of about 230 sq.kms. Each has an elected body, which looks after the problems and needs of the people at the grassroots level.
5. The Parliament of Bhutan is a bicameral institution. It consists of the king of Bhutan together with an upper house, the National Council and a lower house, the National Assembly. (Article 10:1).
6. Thierry Mathou, *The Political Achievements of His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck, the Fourth King of Bhutan (1972-2006)* (Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2008).

7. Biswajit Das, "Bhutan's new king committed to democracy", *Washington Post*, December 18, 2006.
8. The Associated Press and other international media reported the details of the colourful coronation ceremony that took place on the forecourt of the Royal Palace on November 6, 2008.
9. In 1998, Ngedup was appointed as the Minister of Health and Education, and later on as the Prime Minister as the Prime Minister on July 9, 1999. He continued to serve in that capacity until July 20, 2000.
10. Election Commission of Bhutan website
11. Jigme Yoezer Thinley, a former civil servant, was appointed as the Secretary in the Ministry of Home Affairs in 1992, before becoming a Deputy Minister in the said ministry in January 1994. After a few months, he was appointed as Bhutan's Permanent Representative to the United Nations. Prior to initiation of democratic processes, he was Prime Minister twice, from July 20, 1998 – July 9, 1999, and from August 30 – August 20, 2004.
12. For some discussion of the relationship between Buddhism and Gross National Happiness, see Tashi Wangmo and John Valk, "Under the Influence of Buddhism: The Psychological Well-being Indicators of GNH", *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, Vol. 26, Summer 2012, pp. 53-81.
13. Karma Phuntsho, Bhutan's unique democracy: a first verdict, http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/institution/Bhutan_s_unique_a_first_verdict

Abu Nasar Saied Ahmed is heading the Banikanta Kakati Research Institute as its Honorary Director. His latest publication is *Assam Assembly Elections 2016: Understanding the Choices of Two Communities* (New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2018)

E-mail: ansahmed99@gmail.com

