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**Bhutan's Political Transition –
Between Ethnic Conflict and Democracy**

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Bhutan's Political Transition – Between Ethnic Conflict and Democracy

Until recently Bhutan (*Drukyul* - Land of the Thunder Dragon) did not fit into the story of the global triumph of democracy. Not only the way it came into existence but also the manner in which it was interpreted made the process of democratization exceptional. As a land-locked country which is bordered on the north by Tibet in China and on the south by the Indian states Sikkim, West Bengal, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, it was a late starter in the process of state-building. Nevertheless, it seems that the last, reclusive Himalayan kingdom started a silent transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy by introducing parliamentary democratic elements. Initiated by the king rather than a revolutionary movement or a national catastrophe, this radical step was unusual: a voluntary reallocation of power in the face of a remarkable indifference towards democracy by the people. A great political leap with rising concerns and hopes not only among the ruling dynasty but surprisingly also among the common people of Bhutan.

Historical Perspectives

Generally Bhutan's political development can be divided into three major periods. First, the theocratic era from 1616 to 1907; second, around 100 years of monarchy under the rule of the Wangchuk dynasty, and third, the era since 2008 when Bhutan became the world's youngest democracy after passing a new constitution and holding the first National Assembly elections.

The hereditary monarchy of Bhutan was established in 1907, emerging from a 250-year-old dual system of administration (*Chhoesi*) based on two realms of power, a secular and religious one, and headed by the *Shabdrung* (head of state). This system comprised the *Druk Desi*, responsible for the temporal administration of the country, and the *Je Khenpo* (*lord abbot*), the chief abbot responsible for religious matters, representing the Buddhist clergy of the country, and heading the central monastic body (*Dratshang Lhentshog* or Council/Commission for Ecclesiastical Affairs). The *Chhoesi* system, which was established by *Shabdrung* Ngawang Namgyal (a Tibetan monk and considered as founder of the state) in the mid-seventeenth century, can be identified as one of the most crucial landmarks in the genesis of Bhutan's structure of governance. Before, without centralized rule from the mid-seventh to the 19th century, Bhutan relied on systems of local rule centered upon clans and religious dynasties. To secure Bhutan's identity as a *Drukpa* state

(*Drukpa* refers here to the ruling faction in Bhutanese society), five wars were fought with Tibet and the Mongols, the last ending in victory for Bhutan, allowing a *Shabdrung* reincarnation to become the sovereign in 1734. However, the ensuing system of religious authority proved unstable (especially after the death of Namgyal in 1651), characterized by inner conflict and power concentrated in local rulers. In 1774 a peace treaty was signed with the English East India Company and from the late 18th century onwards, Bhutan was brought under the umbrella of British-India. Following a war in 1864 it ceded its Duar territories, an area bordering India and controlled by Bhutan since the 18th century, to the British in return for annual compensation under the Treaty of Sinchulu (1865) which led to the territorial consolidation of the country. In 1910, this treaty was revised in Punakha and signed with the British, granting Bhutan autonomy in internal matters on the condition that foreign policy would follow British advice. This arrangement was affirmed by independent India in 1947, which recognized Bhutan as a sovereign country. Towards the end of the 19th century the *real* political power had become concentrated in the governors of Paro and Tongsa districts and regional rivalry prevailed.

Nevertheless, even until today, various aspects of the *Chhoesi* still exist and continue to play a significant role in the country's development process, especially the *Je Khenpo*, who also represents the Council for Ecclesiastical Affairs. Despite the increasing control of the state over the religious sphere, it continues to play an important role not only in the spiritual and cultural life of the people but also in significant government institutions. Therefore, one can state that Buddhism was not only the unifying force in the original process of state building but also in maintaining the country's ideational foundation until today.

The Wangchuk Dynasty

After the diarchy of lay and ecclesiastical leadership in Bhutan agreed to establish a hereditary monarchy and a coronation agreement with the British was signed, Sir Ugyen Wangchuk, the son of the 51st *Druk Desi* and influential pro-British governor of Tongsa, became Bhutan's first king. This marked not only the founding of the Bhutanese state but also the end of civil-war and the conflict with the British Raj in South Asia. Ugyen was succeeded by his son Jigme Wangchuk (1926–52). Under the latter's reign, the rule of the Wangchuk dynasty became further entrenched, with the country becoming consolidated and brought under the direct control of the absolute monarchy. Having this in mind, one could state that the major achievements of the first two kings were a smooth and

successful opening towards 'the outer world' as well as ensuring of power and legitimacy of the dynastic rule of the Wangchuks. The third king, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk (1952–72), can be actually seen as the 'father of modern Bhutan'. His decisions to develop and modernize the country included an active promotion of education, technological development, and political reform. He abolished serfdom and slavery and carried out major land reforms. The fourth monarch, Jigme Singye Wangchuk (1972-2006), continued his father's modernization policies, yet remained equally committed to upholding a centralized and uniform culture, attaching more value to *Gross National Happiness (GNH)* than simply rapid economic development. Furthermore, he focused much on the construction of a collective identity to produce a base for national ideology. This can be seen as a continuation of "ideological engineering" which started already in 1963, as the King altered his title to *Druk Gyalpo* (Dragon King), with the aim of asserting a distinct Bhutanese identity. Since 2006, the fifth and current king Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk has tried continue the policies of cautious socio-economic and political modernization and development.

Pursuing the Path to Democracy

Generally the processes of democratic transformation from authoritarian monarchical rule towards parliamentary democracy was initiated by the third Druk Gyalpo (king), Jigme Dorji Wangchuk. In 1953 he guided Bhutan towards a constitutional monarchy by establishing a National Assembly (*Tshogdu Chenmo*) over which he *initially* retained veto power. In order to strengthen the legislature, his 1968 decree furnished the National Assembly with institutional sovereignty and the power to remove the King through a vote of no-confidence (based on a two-thirds' majority), came into force from 1969. According to some political observers, this latter one was established against the will of the people's representatives which is quite an unusual phenomenon in an international comparison. However, it is difficult to imagine this provision actually being applied in Bhutan. Nevertheless, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk was, careful to secure the Wangchuk dynasty, by stipulating that a successful vote of no-confidence would result in the next Wangchuk family member in the line of succession automatically acceding to the throne. However, his political reform measures included also the introduction of a Royal Advisory Council (*Lodoi Tshogde*) in 1965 and a Council of Ministers (*Lhengye Zhungtshog*) in 1968 "as a broad based royal consultative body" to differentiate and institutionalize the executive branch of government.

In order to establish a kind of check-and-balance system in the political system he undertook major reforms regarding the organization of the judiciary. In order to separate the judiciary from the executive and legislative a High Court (*Thrimkhang Gongma*) was established.

The fourth king Jigme Singye Wangchuk, besides temporarily weakening of the parliament, instituted short-term withdrawals of the vote of confidence as well as the re-introduction of the king's veto power, continued the democratic reform process. In 1998 the monarch dissolved the Council of Ministers, announcing that ministers formerly appointed by him would instead be approved by the National Assembly. This was a far reaching step because the king not only dissolved his own government but also transferred his powers to this new elected executive. The resultant Council of Ministers was given more control over state affairs, with the head of government rotated annually among the cabinet members and the king remaining the head of state. The first draft of a new constitution was presented in December 2002, envisaging a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy. A revised version proposed by the king has been under discussion since March 2005 and foresees fundamental changes to the political procedures and institutions.

Moving towards a democratic constitutional monarchy, on 18 July 2008, the fifth king, Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, signed the constitution which marked formally the end of a century of absolute royal rule. Beside the establishment of a multiparty democracy, the notions of separation of power and check-and-balances got further institutionalized into the political system of Bhutan with this latest political reform. The executive is now vested in the *Lhengye Zhungtshog* (Council of Ministers) which functions as a cabinet and is headed by the Prime Minister, a post which was abolished after the assassination of the first Prime Minister of Bhutan Palden Dorji on April 5, 1964. The *Lhengye Zhungtshog* has to aid and assist the *Druk Gyalpo* (the dragon king) who is the head of the state. The legislative power lies with the bicameral parliament which consists of the *Druk Gyalpo* and the two houses: the National Assembly (lower house) and the National Council (upper house) and the. It is important to note, that the vote of confidence against the government got re-introduced and enshrined into the institution. Regarding the judicial branch, the authority is vested in the Royal Courts of Justice, comprising the Supreme Court, the High Court, the *Dzongkhag* Court, and the *Dungkhag* Court. Interestingly, the *Druk Gyalpo* still poses the right to established from time to time on the recommendation of the National Judicial Commission further Courts and Tribunals. Additionally, to strengthen the democratization process and to enhance public participation, Bhutan reform efforts are aiming in the last

years on the development of local government bodies (e.g. Block and District Development Committees) and to equip them with the authority to execute socio-economic programs.

The peak of the democratic transition was marked by the first parliamentary elections in 2008. This event spearheaded the establishment of the current institutional settings and was accomplished in a very idiosyncratic Bhutanese style. In order to achieve some democratic exercise and acquaint people with the practice of voting, the government carried out a mock election one year earlier in April and May 2007. The voters had to choose among four imaginary political parties. Each of these was identified by a color representing a certain ideology: yellow for heritage and tradition, red was for rapid industrialization and development, blue for civic sense, and green for environmentalism. The electoral process took place in two phases. In the first round, all four parties competed against each other. But only the two strongest (largest shares of votes) were able to enter the second round, which was the runoff competition in this mock election. For observers it was not surprising that the yellow party, which is actually the colour associated with the king, finally bet on the red party and won comfortably. It is also not astonishing, that the outcome of this fictional election was more or less confirmed in the *real* elections in March 2008. This was the first election featuring universal adult suffrage and which included political parties (before, the right to participate in elections for political parties in some local elections was not granted). Though the registration of one party was rejected by the Election Commission, only two newly-founded political parties, the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT, Bhutan Harmony Party), led by former bureaucrat Jigmi Y Thinley, and the People's Democratic Party (PDP), led by Sangay Ngedup, a close relative of the present king, were able to participate in this election. However, besides the fact that both parties possessed very similar manifestos and ideological differences, which were hard to differentiate, it seems that the DPT became identified by the electorate as closer to the monarch and won a landslide victory capturing 45 out of 47 seats in the National Assembly in which the PDT apparently formed the tiniest opposition in the world. To sum up, there is no doubt that this election was a significant step towards the establishment of a democratic order in Bhutan. Not only voter turnout was successfully achieved with around 80 %, but also the monitoring of the elections by the international community was positive with regard to the conduct of the elections.

Bhutan's Ethnic Puzzle

To contextualize the challenges of the any social-economic and political reform and modernization, one has first to understand the mapping of Bhutan's complex ethnic-territorial typography. Bhutanese society is multi-ethnic, being composed of several distinct communities whose differences rest on ethnicity, profession, social structure, beliefs and values. The people consist of so-called indigenous groups as well as immigrants from neighboring countries, namely Nepal, India, Myanmar (Burma) and Tibet (China). Although it is generally difficult to place the people living in Bhutan into specific ethnic categories, it is possible to identify at least three major ethnic communities, the *Ngalong*, the *Lhotshampa*, and the *Sharchop*.

The *Ngalong* are of Tibetan origin and concentrated in the western and northern districts of the country. The term *Ngalong* literally means 'those risen earliest or converted first'. Basically they follow the Drupka school and speak *Dzongkha* (meaning 'language of the palace/*Dzong*'), the official (national) language of Bhutan as well as, alongside English, the language of administration. Today the *Ngalong* provide and implement their own culture as the core value of the Bhutanese nation and also dominate the socioeconomic and political elite and decision-making institutions of the country. The King's family belongs to this ethnic group.

The name *Lhotshampa*, literally 'those living in the south or southerners', refers to the Nepalese-speaking people, which are of Indo-Aryan or Nepalese origin, settled in Bhutan's border areas, particularly in the southwest and southeast. Generally, the *Lhotshampa* are classified as Hindus, but several groups are Buddhist or animist as well other religious beliefs. Having this in mind, one has to state that although the *Lhotshampa* do not constitute a homogeneous social category, they try to retain their Nepalese culture, language (Nepali), religion and traditions. As a result, tensions have arisen between their own group and the ruling *Drukpa* elites who belong to the *Ngalong*, and who identify their own culture as the base for a national identity, advocating it as the cultural heritage of Bhutan. In this context, the *Lhotshampa* are recognized by some factions of the ruling elite as a threat to the integrity, culture and identity of the country.

The *Sharchop* claim to be the oldest of the three major ethnic communities in Bhutan, with various sources identifying them as among its earliest inhabitants. The term *Sharchop* refers to the people 'living in the east'. They are of Indo-Mongoloid (or Burmese) stock and speak *Tsangla*. Despite the fact that many of them have been assimilated into the *Drukpa*

culture of the *Ngalong*, sections of the *Sharchop* still retain their close cultural and socio-economic ties with North East India and Myanmar (Burma). In addition, the *Sharchop* usually follow the Nyingmapa school of Mahayana Buddhism and not the Kagyupa school, which is recognized by the government as the core constituent of the nation's cultural foundation. Interactions between the *Sharchop* and neighbouring India and Myanmar are regarded with suspicion by the ruling *Drukpa* elite, which feel similarly threatened by links between the Lhotshampa and bordering Nepal and India.

However, these three broad categories *Ngalong*, *Lhotshampa*, and *Sharchop* do not constitute monolithic blocks and within them are minor communities of varied socioeconomic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, there are indigenous ethnic groups or tribes, for example the Brokpas (a nomadic community in central Bhutan, of Tibetan origin), Mons (or Monpas, living in the east and south east, considered themselves to be the oldest inhabitants), Khens (located in central Bhutan, with Indo-Mongoloid features), Birmis (a nomadic group in the east), Lhops or Doyas (a tribe in the south west who claim to be aboriginal inhabitants), Lepchas (a very small community in the west, of Sikkimese or Indian-Nepali origin), Bodos (a community in the south) and Tephos (a group in north Bhutan, of Indian origin), to add to these categories. Besides this ethnic clustering there is also a religious categorization. According to official claims, the majority of Bhutanese are Buddhists, who follow the *Kagyupa School*, namely the *Drukpa* branch of it. However, besides the Buddhists among them there are various religious minorities are Hindus, Christians, animists and Muslims, also known as *Kaches*. A main concern for these tribes has been the loss of their identity due to the government's cultural policy which might question the willingness of the ruling elite in developing credible and sustainable democratic norms, values and procedures. Furthermore, a major ethnic conflict which has emerged since the 1980s is casting its shadows on the notion of Bhutan as a place of democratic tranquillity.

Melting Pot or Salad Bowl?

For a variety of reasons it seems that Bhutan has had extraordinary difficulties in integrating the increasing number of people of Nepali origin. This 'Nepalese Issue', also known as the 'Southern Problem', is a major challenge facing the Bhutanese state. It is primarily an ethnic conflict between the *Lhotshampa*, people of Nepalese origin living in southern Bhutan, and the *Ngalong* (of Tibetan stock) who dominate the ruling elite and

state institutions. The attempted coup of 1964 by dissidents and the 'annexation' of neighboring Sikkim in 1975 by India, in which Nepalese allegedly played a significant role, fuelled suspicions and existing prejudices against further immigration of ethnic Nepalese. The number of immigrants across open and porous borders increased in the early 1960s at a time when the Bhutanese government was attempting to initiate a process of economic modernization. Gradually the government portrayed Nepali immigrants as a threat to national stability and sovereignty. Thereupon, during the 1980s, the royal administration of Bhutan, supported by the monastic authorities and the conservative *Drukpa* middle class, implemented a restrictive migration policy and an integration policy to draw the *Lhotshampa* into the national mainstream. The Lhotshampa, in turn, feeling marginalized and discriminated against, began to perceive this integration as harmful to its own identity and felt the need to resist this process of assimilation into a dominating and exclusive Drukpa culture. Major steps towards the 'Bhutanization' of the population of Nepali origin includes the promulgation of *Dzongkha* as the national language and the only official language at schools, the Bhutan Marriage Act, and the implementation of *Driglam Namzha*, Bhutan's cultural policy. However, most significant were the passing of citizenship acts passed in 1958, 1977 and 1985. The latter act "defined the requirements for citizenship, introducing seven categories of residents and non-residents from 'F1' (full citizen) to 'F7' (non-national)". Lhotshampas had to provide documentary evidence that they - or both parents - had resided in Bhutan since 1958. Ethnic Nepalese who had migrated to the country after 1958 (this year was made to a cut-off point) were labelled as illegal or non-national, raising tensions particularly as large numbers were expelled and forced to live as refugees in camps across the borders in Nepal and India. The crisis reached its flashpoint when the Bhutanese census of 1988 identified a significant number of illegal immigrants and landholdings, portrayed by the government as a planned and systematic infiltration of southern Bhutanese districts by the Nepalese. Using the Bhutanese Armed Forces, these people were forced to leave the country, many refugees reporting violations of human rights and the eviction of people who possessed correct citizenship certificates. Especially the 1988 consensus aroused much criticism regarding the remarkable violent and coercive approach by the security forces in conducting it. The aim was to detect illegal immigrants and to expel them.

While it is impossible to identify how many left the country voluntarily or under pressure, it is estimated that more than 100,000 Nepalese live in refugee camps in Eastern Nepal, a major and on-going cause for tension between both countries.

The conflict with the people of Nepalese origins was further escalating through rigorous development and modernization program in the southern districts of Bhutan, like the *Green Belt Policy*. This proposed project includes the idea of establishing a 1 km-wide corridor along the Indo-Bhutan border. The official reason behind the Green Belt was to check erosion and prevent floods in India. This policy has been interpreted by critical observers as part of an official effort to culturally assimilate the Nepali-speaking *Lhotshampas* by dissolving their geographical concentration. However, the government has not been able to implement this project in the face of immense opposition to the negative impact it would have on the population living in the southern districts of Bhutan. Approximately 20%–30% of residents would be displaced.

Bhutan's Trepidation Complex

Basically there is the primal fear among the ruling elite that Bhutan is losing its territorial integrity and independence in decision-making as a sovereign state which is surrounded by the two largest Asian powers. Therefore, to be able to resist undue influence from outside, strict internal cohesion is considered as most crucial for the country's existence. Having this in mind, one perceived threat has gained particular momentum: that the "Drukpa Bhutanese" gets outnumbered by Nepalese immigrants. In this context, one of the most significant experiences for Bhutan's elite was India's annexation of Sikkim in 1975, leading to an end of the absolute rule of the Chogyal Monarchy. It is claimed that this was made possible only because of the huge numbers of immigrated Nepali, which lorded over the indigenous communities of the Lepchas and Bhotias by voting in a disputed referendum for integration into the Union of its southern neighbour. As a result, there was an increasing surge of nationalist sentiment among the many Bhutanese who voiced concerns about getting marginalized in their own country and the emergence of a pan-Nepali identity and nationalism based on the imagined concept of a 'Greater Nepal'. These fears became further increased by the Gorkhaland movement led by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) for a Nepali speaking state (homeland) in the 1980s. While there is little concrete evidence either in Nepal, India or Bhutan of such an idea taking actual shape, the term is used to stoke an imagined threat to the country's identity, cultural heritage and political structure. Drawing on this, the Bhutanese government passed in the following years restrictive citizenship acts and adopted cultural policy, *Driglam Namzha*, which some political observed entitled as *Bhutanization* of the country.

Driglam Namzha, An Identity Project

The vast social and political changes created serious concerns about how to bridge the tensions between tradition and modernity. Having this in mind, one of the most significant and troubling questions for Bhutan's elite is how to preserve the country's culture and identity.

The notion that the king is not anymore the focus and sole guarantor and symbol for a united Bhutan is for large segments of the ruling elite as well as the common people disturbing. Therefore, political reforms are seen as critical by the "traditionalists". This conflict between reactionary forces and reformers found its peak in the assassination of Bhutan's First Prime Minister Palden Dorji, who represented the country's efforts for political transformation and modernization as well as the failed coup in December 1964. The formulation and application of Bhutan's cultural policy can be seen (among other reasons) as an attempt to ease this inter-elite rivalry which prevails until today.

The royal decree of *Driglam Namzha*, understood abstractly as 'the principles of Bhutanese traditions, customs, etiquette, and values' and, more concretely, as 'national dress and language', was issued by King Jigme Singye in 1989, and enforced by the Bhutanese government in the same year. *Driglam Namzha*, alongside other measures, was intended to forge a distinctive Bhutanese national identity on the basis of the culture of the ruling *Ngalong*, deemed by the King to be the country's main resource. The *Driglam Namzha* includes the mandatory wearing of the national costume (*gho* for men and *kira* for women) on formal occasions. Reports suggest, however, that the dress code is often applied beyond the stipulations of the King's decree, extending even to everyday life. Failure to abide by the dress code of *Driglam Namzha* may result in short-term imprisonment or the imposition of a fine. The *Dzongkha* language, mother tongue of the *Ngalong* people of the west highland districts, was already declared the national language of Bhutan by the King in 1961. In 1989 the Nepali language was taken off the curriculum of educational institutions and all materials in Nepali were removed from schools.

However, the government was accused of using the *Driglam Namzha* regulations not only to preserve the cultural identity of Bhutan but also as an instrument to harass and suppress the people of Nepali origin. In this context, Bhutan's cultural policy is identified as a deliberate strategy of persecution to drive the Nepali out of the country. The argument made by some human rights activists, that the knowledge of (Drukpa) Bhutanese language, history and culture is mandatory for citizenship, is identified by minorities as the

social construction of an exclusive, culturally-based nationalism of the majority group leading to a forced assimilation. Being aware of the harsh domestic and international critic, in July 2009, Bhutan's then newly elected legislature passed a law and declared an end to strict enforcement of *Driglam Namzha*. In this departure from past decisions, Bhutan's political elite decided that "the best way to preserve and promote *Driglam Namzha* was not through enforcement but through education and understanding". However, the causes as well as the consequences of this cultural policy will remain since the Bhutanese government continues to implement it, not in a coercive but in a peaceful and more cunning way.

Gross-National Happiness

The term Gross National Happiness (GNH) was coined by the royal Bhutanese government as a benchmark and developmental goal. As the overarching philosophy of development, it expresses the conviction that all development strategies must contribute to both the material well-being as well as the spiritual, emotional and cultural needs of the Bhutanese people. Each modernization strategy must maintain a balance between the material and non-material needs of individuals and society. The four core principles of GNH are: (1) economic growth and development; (2) preservation and promotion of cultural heritage (in this case that of the ruling elite); (3) preservation and sustainable use of the environment; and (4) good governance. Underlying these four pillars is the belief that that GNH is more important than gross national product. Today, this policy does not only constitutes a remarkable feature in Bhutanese politics and is appreciated internationally as a unique way of environmental preservation, but since it is also referring to cultural and traditional protection it is seen by some political observers as a critical instrument of the exclusivist policy of 'Bhutanization'.

Conclusion - The World Youngest Democracy – Enhanced or Truncated?

Taking into account the country's contemporary social, political and economic challenges as well as the king's self-conception as a guarantor of Bhutan's development and the people's well-being, it will be very much unlikely that the king will in future perform *only* a symbolic function. The degree of political reforms which could be described as a kind of "monarchical guided democracy" can be seen as the most clear and institutionalized

indication therefore. The evaluation, how far this is owed too potential reluctance in giving up power or to altruistic intensions to safeguard the country's young democratic institutions in cases of aberrations in the political development, lies beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, some statements have to be made not only in order to contribute to this puzzle but also to be able to assess the quality of democracy and the prospect of its consolidation.

First, besides democratic processes, one has to state that the king is without question the major stakeholder in the political system of Bhutan. He still possesses significant formal veto powers in the political decision-making process especially regarding the nomination of most of the leading posts of all three branches of Bhutan's political system like five of 25 members of the National Council (the rest represent the 20 Dzonghags/districts), the Chief Justice of Bhutan, Chief Election Commissioner, Auditor General etc. as well as the subordinated authorities. Therefore, there is no doubt that policy-formulation, implementation as well as monitoring will remain under the control of the monarch. Furthermore, he is still the supreme commander of the Royal Bhutanese Army (RBA) and has significant influence on its organization, especially regarding the appointment of the top echelons. Civilian control exists over the armed forces; however, democratic civilian control has still to be institutionalized which means that the king owns still the monopoly over the country's most significant coercive force—the military. Moreover, in order to enforce the idea of accountability and transparency in decision-making as well as the development of democratic norms and procedures, parliamentary oversight over the security sector has to be more focused on reform measures.

Second, beside the formal prerogatives, the socio-political culture and the royal legacy in Bhutan are generating for the king a tremendous informal mechanism to influence. Turner et. Al. are stating in this context, that “in the case of Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck, his dominant location in a hierarchy enabled the application of vertical authority over his subordinates. He sat unchallenged at the apex of political power in Bhutan and was able to utilize the legitimacy and more tangible resources of the state which were associated with this position. The state was organized and acculturated to serving the king and implementing the wishes of the king”.

Various observers are stating that the people are expecting that the king continue with efforts in guiding the country through the challenge of modernization and at the same time avoid negative side-effects of opening up. Having this in mind, this reluctance towards politics creates a significant resource for the king to maintain a role as the major change-

agent.

For the present, political culture can be (still) described as a balance between traditional deference and general consensus. The major challenge for the royal government in the context of promoting and introducing democracy is how to stimulate public popular participation and political awareness without creating systemic instability. Taking into account the political turmoil in countries which have to face the twofold challenge of democratization and socio-economic development, it seems that the chosen processes of gradual introductions of political reform are matching the particular needs of the country and its people, at least for the majority. With view on the current democratic set back and the political, violent turmoil in the Maldives, it seems that there is no universal strategy for democratic transition. In this context, one can state that the conservative, non-confrontational and apolitical attitude of the (Drukpa) Bhutanese people as well as the notion of consensus in decision-making created a promising environment and no serious hindrances for reforms until now. However, Bhutan's political elite have also to internalize and respect that political dissent is a part of necessary democratic processes like political competition and contestation.

Third, it seems apparent that there is also a need for something which might be called national reconciliation between the Drukpa majority and the people of Nepalese origin. There is no doubt that, the eviction of the latter people and the subsequent refugee problem as well as the associated human rights issues will cast its shadows on the future political development of the country and remains a "democratic hypothec/brownfield". In this context, it is interesting to note that the constitutional provision - due to the tradition of unification and consensual politics – implies that parties cannot be established on the basis of religion, ethnicity, or region. This can be interpreted as a strategy to deny ethnic and cultural minorities, especially the people of Nepali origin, an effective political representation. Additionally the regulation that only people with a university degree can stand up as candidates in elections for public offices could be identified as a further distortion for equal representation and fair elections. Therefore, some kind of a (new) ethnic power-sharing formula might be helpful to avoid potential future clashes. A first step in this direction could be the acceptance of legitimate opposition by minorities especially those of Nepali origin and that such political parties are not apriori interpreted as an anti-system force and a threat towards the integrity of the country.

Fourth, the attempts of preserving the country's own culture and create a national identity are a comprehensible concern. Nevertheless, there is a threat of what Amartya Sen is

calling *Illusion of Singularity*, the tendency “to privilege exactly one identity over all others”. This, according to Sen, proved to be in many cases most harmful. The policy of *Driglam Namzha*, which is based on a singular focus on cultural identity, not only led to the neglecting of different cultural streams but might also enforce future conflicts on the collective as well as individual level. An increasing influx of additional or alternative identity conceptions, imposed on the country through the process of social and economic modernization, could create crucial challenges for the *Bhutanization* efforts. In other words, it might actuate a vicious circle in which the ruling elite is forced to apply even more strict cultural policies to avoid a potential devolution of its identity project which in consequence could provoke further identity conflicts and disorientation among the Bhutanese society.

However, taking the successful, smooth process of modernization under observation, it appears that in the given context, *Driglam Namzha* as well as the vision of Gross National Happiness is not the perfect but a pragmatic approach to tackle the ambitious task of preserving the country’s rich cultural heritage, achieving sustainable development by starting the transition from autocratic rule towards democracy at the same time. To sum up, even if the conflict between the Drukpa majority and the Nepalese minority is somehow resolved, the challenges posed by the growing cultural diversity of contemporary societies entering the processes of globalization will remain.

In sum, the fact that democracy is often described as a “gift” from the monarch and as such “from above” makes the political transformation in Bhutan peculiar but not a *priori* condemnable/ objectionable. The question of who has sown the seeds of democracy - the king or the self-declared pro-democracy movements by people of Nepali origin- is misleading. The major challenge today is how to make such a top-down model work and the transition to democracy sustainable. With reference to Thierry Mathou, it is most important that “the role of the state will have to be redefined from that of a “provider” to that of an “enabler” of democracy.

Therefore, one can state that using such terms as “totalitarian” or “authoritarian regime” to describe the current political system do not fit at all the reality of Bhutan. Ultimately, democracy in Bhutan remains still in its infancy but is not a truncated one.