

Bhutan Election 2013: Happiness under stress?



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THE IDEA OF MUTUAL CONSULTANCY IN THE POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IS NOTHING NEW IN BHUTAN. THE ORIGINS OF IT DATE BACK TO THE OLD CHHOESI SYSTEM, WHICH WAS A DUAL CONCEPT OF GOVERNMENT THAT PREVAILED FROM 1650 TO 1907, COMPRISING A TEMPORAL HEAD (DRUK DESI) AND A RELIGIOUS LEADER (JE KHENPO) AS THE LEADING INSTITUTIONS OF THE COUNTRY'S SOCIO-POLITICAL SYSTEM

On April 23rd, the people of Bhutan went to the polls to elect a new upper house, or National Council (NC), for the second time ever in their country's history. This marks the beginning of the national parliamentary election process which will be concluded end of June or early July this year with two round of polls for the lower house, the National Assembly (NA). The NA was dissolved on April 20th and has to be re-elected within 90 days. Based on a first assessment one can state, that besides some weather related concerns and hurdles, the NC elections went relatively smoothly. Most importantly, they were not disturbed by any remarkable 'politically motivated' violent incident or by undue interference by any state institutions or other actors. In short, the elections were free and fair.

Without a doubt, a positive development was the increase of the number of nominated candidates which went up from 52 to 67 to get elected in one of the 20 Dzongkhags, the country's constituencies for the NC elections. This made sure that each constituency, unlike in the 2008 elections, had at least one candidate to vote for. Only the decline in the voter turnout from 53 (2008) down to around 45 per cent (171,544 out of 379,819 registered voters) beclouded the enthusiasm about the positive course of the latest NC elections. Nevertheless, this performance is still a great achievement considering the fact that Bhutan's democratic procedures are still in its infancy. Leaving aside the fact that these are only plain statistics and that there is hardly any information available on how deeply entrenched democratic norms and values are entrenched in the kingdom's state and society, many analysts seem to agree that the country is progressing well on the path of democracy. The country's process of democratic transition is commonly praised for several important reasons. While the state's shift towards democracy is indeed a unique and laudable process, the context within which it takes place deserves closer evaluation.

First of all, one cannot deny that the decision of the king to deliberately give up much of his power to his people—as a 'royal gift' that transforms the country from an absolute monarchy into a parliamentary democracy—is a unique phenomenon in the world. The rationale behind such a hypothesis is usually twofold: It should distract from the fact that the establishment of democracy is an elite driven process in form of a top-down model. As such, it is not an outcome of a social-political movement or a revolutionary act. Additionally, it should also conceal the potential notion that it was a cunning move of the king to voluntarily share power before he gets forced

to do it. As such, the monarch is in control of the transfer of power and is able to secure a significant role for the royal family in the country's future.

Second, closely related with the argument of 'giving up power voluntarily', there is the persistent statement of the 'apathy' of the Bhutanese people towards democracy. More concretely, there is the claim that Bhutanese people are not in favour of democracy since it is perceived as something which does not fit into the Bhutanese culture and traditions.

Third, as is pointed out time and again: just like ancient Rome wasn't built in one day, the creation of a democratic system of governance in Bhutan needs time. Therefore, the Bhutanese monarchy intentionally abstained from an overhasty development in order to avoid any undesirable side-effects of opening up the country in socio-economic and political terms. The reason for this is the conviction of the various kings and their administrations that Bhutan is only able to achieve sustainable progress through a gradual approach in tackling the issues of underdevelopment, not only economically but especially politically. Therefore, a highly innovative idea got conceptualized; the so called Gross National Happiness (GNH). As the overarching philosophy of economic growth and socio-political progress, the GNH 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 GNH is, among other things, calculated on the basis of economic growth; promotion of cultural heritage (i.e. that of the ruling elite); environmental preservation and sustainability; and good governance. Underlying these pillars is the belief that gross national happiness is more important than gross national product.

However, happy or not happy, even though the country has demonstrated its ability to hold successful elections, one cannot help but get the impression that the overall 'feel good approach' is starting to lose some of its appeal and glamour. Despite the fact that the government-friendly media put in much effort to evoke a democratic buzz in the country, there was a remarkable drop of 8 per cent in the voting turn out compared to 2008. It is argued that this is partly due to the 'silent emergence' of social, economic and political rifts among the Bhutanese. These grievances are reflected in the growing polarisation of the society in the country. It is stressed here, that the appearance of polarisation is due to

growing disparities based on an increasingly distorted access to economic and political resources. This phenomenon finds its expression in a slowly emerging rift between the small new urban and educated middle class vis-à-vis the rural population, which constitutes the bulk of the Bhutanese people. In order to understand this, one should keep in mind that politics in Bhutan still remain an exclusive and, as already indicated before, elite-driven process. However, unlike some authors note in a romanticised depiction of the country's political system, Bhutan's political elite



does not comprise merely the king and his closest advisors. Rather, elusive politics are characterised by an informal but persistent mutually influencing interaction between the royal family and the newly emerged middle class. This small but growing middle class consists of bureaucrats and an increasingly vocal group of economic entrepreneurs in the country's few 'urbanising centres'. Because of their economic interests Bhutan's middle class was instrumental in the opening up of the country, and are also a driving force behind the ongoing democratisation process.

The idea of mutual consultancy in the political decision-making process is nothing new in Bhutan. The origins of it date back to the old Chhoesi system, which was a dual concept of government that prevailed from 1650 to 1907, comprising a temporal head (Druk Desi) and a religious leader (Je Khenpo) as the leading institutions of the country's socio-political system. It was established by Ngawang Namgyal, the founder of the modern state of Bhutan, and is recognized as a significant landmark in the genesis of Bhutan's structure of governance. Various aspects of the Chhoesi-system still exist and continue to play a significant role in the country's development process. This finds its expression not only in the fact that the religious institutions still have a significant say in

political decision making processes but also in the notion that political processes are based on power sharing, mutuality and exchange. The contemporary power sharing got pursued and enhanced through the broadening of the country's political and economic upper crust combined with the appearance of informal inter-elite arrangements. This phenomenon can be best seen in the above indicated 'behind the scenes' incorporation of members belonging to the middle class, especially of those who received specialised higher education

abroad, in the political decision-making. In sum, the democratic transition is not a process that was ordered by the king only; it was also initiated and supported by a middle class which is guided by its own interests to enhance democratic enthusiasm in the country. Without the help of this middle class neither the build-up of functioning institutions nor the introduction of meaningful elections would have been possible.

After elaborating on the role of the new middle class which has brought to an end the notion that politics in Bhutan are the king's exclusive enterprise, one should also take the myth of the 'apathy' of the Bhutanese people under scrutiny. It is true that in the first phases of the introduction of elections the Bhutanese did not demonstrate overwhelming enthusiasm. Certain political commentators attributed this to a collective state of apathy of the Bhutanese people towards democracy. However, it could be better explained as an expression of prudence about being confronted with something that is not only absolutely new but also constitutes a fundamental change in the political and socio-economic environment. In this context, one must recognize that Bhutan is an extraordinarily remote and isolated place, not only regarding its geographic location but also in terms of its connections with the inter-

national community: until 1907, when the hereditary monarchy was established, Bhutan was completely cut off from the outside world. One of the most significant features of this remarkable phenomenon is that the Himalayan state of the approximate size of Switzerland is in a persistent struggle to keep a balance between state development and maintenance of a suitable but also quite peculiar socio-political structure. Being born in such an setup, 'ground breaking' developments among the Bhutanese are not automatically perceived as

helpful evolutions of a much missed modernity but also as revolutionary occasions that may challenge their time tested and honoured traditions, norms and values. Anxious about the far reaching consequences, the initial scepticism among the people towards elections and democracy did not come by a surprise. In this context, one should point out that since the first general elections in 2008 Bhutan had witnessed one of its most significant political transitions in its modern history. Since then, the processes of democratisation, like the building up of political parties, development of a parliamentary culture and procedures are leisurely moving forward. The electoral processes in particular are getting more and more entrenched not only into the political system but also in the mind-set of the people, at least among the middle class.

On a more cynical note, it seems that the transition from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional parliamentary monarchy not only emerged from an act of altruism but also from a line of thought driven by realpolitik. It was obviously based on a clear assessment of potential trajectories for the monarchy's viability. Several trends and phenomena indicated a rather pessimistic future for an absolute monarchy in the country. Being surrounded by semi-communist and democratic systems; experiencing

a 'pseudo coup' in 1964 which involved an uncle of the king and led to the assassination of the prime minister; facing internally the emergence of an opposition (1990s); the debatable integration of the kingdom of Sikkim into the Indian Union, as well as a decline of its image on the international stage because of the expulsion of around 100,000 Bhutanese of Nepali origin; and the appearance of militant opposition like the Bhutan Tiger Force or the Bhutan Maoist Party, the king had to act in order to maintain at least a minimum of monarchical elements in Bhutan's future political system in order to guarantee the survival of the Wangchuck dynasty.

To conclude, with the repetition of the successful 2008 parliamentary elections one can state that democracy has finally arrived in the Himalayan kingdom. As in any other country, a process with such tremendous impact on state and society does not come without any side-effects. First of all, it created a power vacuum which got immediately filled with the newly emerged largely abroad educated middle class. This was perceived by the politically aware segments of the rural population that the rising significance of this class is or will be at the expense of the traditional stakeholders like village representatives as well as the uneducated, poor population. It is argued here, that this will further enhance the socio-economic inequalities due to a distortion regarding the access to national resources like governmental posts and national revenues. This conflict will gain further prominence with the continuation of the country's development especially the untapped national resources in the context of negotiation over a fair mechanism for the distribution of national wealth. The fact that Bhutan still lacks a significant civil society which could serve as an extra-parliamentary mechanism to aggregate interests and demands of the common Bhutanese people further aggravates the challenge of managing social harmony.

However, in order not to further deepen this polarisation the rural population has to be further included into the political process. Until now the people in the more remote areas of the country showed only limited interest in taken part in the elections neither as candidate nor as voter.

Therefore, much more has to be done to build-up awareness among the 'rural Bhutanese' about the benefits of political participation and the ability to have a say in matters that relate to them. It will be most interesting to observe how far this cleavage will be reflected in the party-focused upcoming National Assembly elections.

In sum, one must stress once again that the problem

is not only about a rural-urban divide, it is also of being uneducated and educated. This cross-cutting cleavage appears especially in tertiary (academic) education. Regarding primary and secondary education the country made already much progress. The fact that a candidature for elections requires a Bachelor degree does not help to improve and to enhance the voter's turnout. Furthermore, especially women should be more encouraged not only to vote but also to stand up for elections. In the latest NC elections only five out of the 67 candidate's were female. The fact that Bhutan has more female than male registered voters might have some positive effects on the voter turnout. Since there is no quota for women in the parliament, an introduction of it might give an additional impetus for a higher political participation of Bhutan's female participation.

To sum up, the transition towards democracy is irreversible. The affection of the people towards the monarchy is deep but it also has its limitations. It is therefore crucial that many Bhutanese are familiarise themselves with the new political developments and that they understand that there is no contradiction between exercising democracy and appreciating their king and traditions. Despite the incorporation of more actors in the country's decision making process, politics in Bhutan remain an exclusive business run by the elite, which got expanded with some new stakeholders. In brief, pro-forma or not, the decision to delegate its executive power could also be interpreted as a part of a divide and rule strategy of the king in order to save as much as possible of the new status quo for his heirs. Most important in this context is who will control the armed forces, the king or the elected parliament as well as who owns the country's most lucrative businesses. In other words: who has the power of the purse? If both remain under the king's authority, democracy is not consolidated. In order to avoid this, the decision making processes should be made more transparent and fully owned by the law makers rather than by elitist groups who greatly influence decision making procedures in consultation with the king. Only a strong parliament, legitimate by a high voter turnout, can prevent the country from informal domains for extra-constitutional influence. If not, democracy in Bhutan will only remain a paper tiger.

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