

# ISAS Insights

No. 211 – 2 July 2013

469A Bukit Timah Road  
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770  
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239  
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447  
Email: [isassecc@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isassecc@nus.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)



## Election Year in Bhutan – Litmus Test of Happiness?

Siegfried O Wolf<sup>1</sup>

On 23 April 2013, 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 marked the beginning of the national parliamentary election process, which will conclude before the end of July this year after the second round of polls for the lower house – the National Assembly (NA) – is held. The NA was dissolved on 20 April and has to be reconstituted within 90 days. Based on a first assessment, one can state that, besides some weather-related concerns and hurdles, the NC elections were held relatively smoothly. Most importantly, they were not disturbed by any 'politically motivated' violent incident of significance or by undue interference by any state institutions or other actors. In short, the elections were free and fair.

A positive development was the increase in the number of nominated candidates for the 20 *Dzongkhags*, the country's constituencies for the NC elections. This ensured 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 per cent to around 45 per cent (171,544 out of 379,819 registered voters), clouded the enthusiasm for the latest NC elections. Nevertheless, this performance is still a great achievement, considering the fact that Bhutan's democratic procedures are still in their infancy. There is hardly any information available on how deeply entrenched democratic norms and values are in the kingdom's polity and society. Many

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr Siegfried O Wolf is Lecturer in International Relations and Comparative Politics at Heidelberg University (South Asia Institute, Department of Political Science). He can be contacted at [swolf@sai.uni-heidelberg.de](mailto:swolf@sai.uni-heidelberg.de). The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS. The author wants to express his gratitude to Mr. Sander Ruben Aarten for his valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

analysts<sup>2</sup> 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 is taking place deserves closer evaluation.

## A 'Royal Gift'

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 rare phenomenon in the world. The rationale behind such a process is usually twofold. The establishment of democracy is an elite-driven process in the 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 move by the King to voluntarily share power before he gets forced to do so. Since the 1950s, several attempts were made to set up organisational platforms to mobilise political opposition among ethnic groups, especially among Bhutanese of Nepalese origin. The most prominent examples are the Bhutan State Congress (BSC) in 1952, the People's Forum for Human Rights Bhutan (PFHRB) in 1989, the Bhutan People's Party (BPP) in 1990 and the Bhutan National Democratic Party (BNDP) in 1992. The BPP was the instigator of anti-government protests which were immediately quelled by the government. Although an outright rebellion was prevented, the protests did initiate a political transition in the country. 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 view about the 'apathy' of the Bhutanese people towards democracy. More concretely, there are claims – by critics of democracy and by proponents of a slow and gradual democratic transition – that the Bhutanese people are not in favour of democracy since it is perceived to be something which does not fit into the Bhutanese culture and traditions.

Third, as is pointed out time and again, the creation of a democratic system of governance in Bhutan needs time. Therefore, the Bhutanese monarchy intentionally abstained from a hasty 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 royal administrations that Bhutan is only able to achieve sustainable progress through a gradual approach towards tackling the issues of underdevelopment, not only economically but especially politically. Therefore, a highly innovative idea got conceptualised; the so-called

---

<sup>2</sup> For example: Marian Gallenkamp. *Consolidating Democracy in Bhutan A Retrospect and a Rebuttal of Democracy Measures*. Spotlight South Asia, APSA (Applied Political Science of South Asia; Heidelberg), Paper Nr. 5, 2012; Medha Bisht, 'Bhutan: elections 2013', in *openDemocracy*, 21 January 2013; Phuntsho, Karma, Bhutan's unique democracy: a first verdict, *openDemocracy*, 2 April 2008; Kaul, Nitasha, 'Bearing Better Witness in Bhutan', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol - XLIII No. 37, September 13, 2008.

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 modernisation 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.

## **A Democratic Buzz**

However, 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, especially for the uneducated people who are confronted with fewer socio-economic opportunities in the country. 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 eight 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. It is stressed here that the appearance of polarisation is due to the growing disparities based on an increasingly distorted access to economic and political resources. This phenomenon finds expression in a slowly-emerging rift between the small newly-urbanised and educated middle class vis-à-vis the rural people who constitute the bulk of the Bhutanese population. In order to understand this, one should keep in mind that politics in Bhutan still remains an exclusive and, as already indicated before, elite-driven process. However, Bhutan’s political elite does not comprise merely the King and his closest advisors. Rather, elitist politics are characterised by an informal but persistent and 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. Its origins 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 recognised 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 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 system got 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 '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 process. 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 in enhancing 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.

### **A Myth of Popular 'Apathy'**

One should also place the myth about the 'apathy' of the Bhutanese people under scrutiny. It is true that in the first phases of the introduction of electoral process, 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, this could be better explained as an expression of prudence when being confronted with something that was not only absolutely new but also constituted a fundamental change in the country's political and socio-economic environment. In this context, one must recognise that Bhutan is an extraordinarily remote and isolated place, not only regarding its geographic location but also in terms of its connections with the international community, apart from India: 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, approximately the size of Switzerland, is in a persistent struggle to keep a balance between state development and the maintenance of a suitable but also quite peculiar socio-political structure. 'Ground breaking' developments among the Bhutanese are not automatically perceived as a helpful evolution of a much-missed modernity but as a revolutionary occasion that may challenge their time-tested and honoured traditions, norms and values. Because of the far-reaching consequences, the initial scepticism among the people towards elections and democracy did not come as a surprise. Since the first general elections in 2008, Bhutan has 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 parliamentary culture and procedures – are moving forward at a leisurely pace. The electoral processes in particular are getting more and more entrenched not only in the political system but also in the people's mind-set, 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 had emerged not only from an act of altruism but also

from a line of thought driven by *realpolitik*. It was likely based on a clear assessment of the potential trajectories for the viability of the monarchical system in Bhutan. Several trends and phenomena indicated a rather pessimistic future for an absolute monarchy in the country. Some factors at work were: Bhutan's sense of being surrounded by semi-communist and democratic systems; Bhutan's experience of a 'pseudo coup' in 1964 which involved an uncle of the king and led to the assassination of the prime minister; the emergence of an opposition in Bhutan (1990s); the debatable integration of the kingdom of Sikkim with the Indian Union, as well as a decline of Bhutan's 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. In those circumstances, 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.

Finally, with the repetition this year of the successful 2008 parliamentary elections, democracy has 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 and largely-foreign-educated middle class. It was perceived by the politically-aware segments of the rural population that the rising significance of this class was or would 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 country's development continuing in regard to the untapped resources in the context of negotiation over a fair mechanism for the distribution of national wealth (especially regarding the revenues that are derived from the rapidly-growing hydropower sector). 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.

## **National Assembly Polls**

However, in order not to deepen this polarisation, the rural population has to be further included in the political process. Until now, the people in the more remote areas of the country showed only limited interest in taking part in the elections either as candidate or as voter. Much more has to be done to build up awareness among the 'rural Bhutanese' about the benefits of political participation and their 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 two-round National Assembly elections, now under way.

In sum, the problem is not only about a rural-urban divide, but also about the uneducated-educated divide. This cross-cutting cleavage appears especially in tertiary education.

Regarding primary and secondary education, the country has already made much progress. The fact that candidature for elections requires a Bachelor's degree does not help enhance the voter turn-out. Furthermore, women should be encouraged more, not only to vote but also to stand up for elections. In the latest NC elections, only five out of the 67 candidates were female. The fact that Bhutan has more females (50.8 %) than males (49.2 %) registered voters might have some positive effects on the voter turn-out. Since there is no minimum quota for women in the parliament, an introduction of a quota might give an additional impetus for higher political participation by Bhutan's female voters.

The transition towards democracy is irreversible, although the affection of the people towards the monarchy is deep. It is therefore crucial that more Bhutanese familiarise themselves with the new political developments and that they understand that there is no contradiction between practising democracy and appreciating their King and traditions. Despite the incorporation of more actors in the country's decision-making process, politics in Bhutan remains an exclusive business run by the elite, which now has got some new stakeholders as well. The King's decision to delegate his executive power could also be interpreted as a strategy 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. Until now, formal mechanisms for parliamentary oversight have remained rudimentary.

Additionally, there is a substantial Indian influence in Bhutan's 'security sector'; and it is unlikely that any fundamental change will be made without 'advice' from New Delhi. In addition to the question of civilian supremacy, the issue of who owns the country's most lucrative businesses will gain significance. In other words: who has the power of the purse? The decision-making processes should be under the auspices of law-makers rather than elitist groups who greatly influence the decision-making procedures in consultation with the King. Only a strong parliament, legitimised by a high voter turn-out, can protect the country from extra-constitutional influence.

.....