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Power Shift in Bhutan and its Implications for India

On 15 September 2018, the party of the incumbent Prime Minister, Tshering Tobgay, the People's Democratic Party, lost in the primary round of the elections in Bhutan. The final round of elections between the top two polling parties, the Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa and the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa, will be held on 18 October 2018 to determine the next government in the country. While Tobgay's defeat came as a surprise to many outsiders, the Bhutanese were not shocked by it, as anti-incumbency is generally a feature of the country's elections. This paper examines Tobgay's defeat and contends that this will not affect Bhutan's relations with India, which regards him as a friend.

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In 2008, Bhutan switched from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary form of government. The first democratically-elected government of the country was that of Jigme Yozer Thinley (2008-2013) of the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) party. In the 2013 elections, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), led by Tshering Tobgay, came into power. On 15 September 2018, Bhutan held its primary round of polls to choose

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the next government. The incumbent party failed to qualify for the final round of polls which are scheduled to be held on 18 October 2018.

The Election Process and Results

In Bhutan, the executive power lies with *Lhengye Zhungthsg* (Council of Ministers) headed by the Prime Minister. In 2008, the country adopted a new constitution which accepted the functioning of a democratic multi-party system. It has a National Assembly (Lower House) whose members are elected by the people for five years.

According to the Constitution of Bhutan:²

1. There shall be a primary round of elections in which the registered political parties whose Letter of Intent is found to be in order in all respects and accordingly accepted by the Election Commission of Bhutan shall contest in all the 20 *Dzongkhags* (districts).
2. The two parties securing the highest and second highest total number of votes polled in the 20 *Dzongkhags* shall be invited by the Election Commission to nominate one candidate each to contest the General Elections in each of the 47 National Assembly *Demkhongs* (constituencies).

According to the Election Commission of Bhutan, the total voter turnout in the September 2018 primary was 66.36 per cent. A total number of 291,098 eligible voters out of 438,663 registered voters cast their votes.³ On 16 September 2018, the results of the primary were declared. The Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) party secured 92,722 votes, the highest number of valid votes received by a party. This was followed by the DPT which won 90,020 votes. The PDP was in third place with 79,883 votes.⁴ For the final round of polls, the DPT and the DNT will formally nominate a candidate each to contest in the 47 National Assembly *Demkhongs*.⁵

² Election Commission of Bhutan. <http://www.ecb.bt/?p=6102>. Accessed on 22 September 2018.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “Declaration of the Results of the Third Parliamentary Elections 2018: Primary Round of the National Assembly”, Election Commission of Bhutan, 16 September 2018. <http://www.ecb.bt/?p=6211>. Accessed on 22 September 2018.

⁵ Ibid.

For the majority of Bhutanese, local issues generally determine their voting choice. High anti-incumbency is a feature of Bhutan's elections. In the April 2018 election of 20 members to the Upper House of the Parliament (an additional five are appointed by the King of Bhutan), only five sitting members won out of 12⁶ who finally contested the elections.⁷ One of the reasons for such a high rate of anti-incumbency in Bhutan is the distrust of the people in their leaders. In its editorial before the September 2018 elections, *Kuensel*, the country's national newspaper, highlighted this distrust, "The country is in the midst of electing its third government but we are as suspicious of the parties and the politicians that will go on to form the government. The restrictions imposed tell us that the Bhutanese cannot be trusted. There is a perception that political parties and politicians are liars. We don't trust our people to attend festivals. But we will trust one of these parties to govern the country for five years."⁸

Implications for India

Tobgay was considered as friend of India.⁹ After being elected prime minister in 2013, Tobgay's first official visit was to India. In June 2014, India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, paid a visit to Bhutan. During the visit, he laid the foundation stone for the 600MW Kholongchhu Hydropower Project and inaugurated the Supreme Court building which was constructed with assistance from the Indian government.¹⁰ A few months after Modi's visit, in November 2014, then-Indian President, Pranab Mukherjee, also visited Bhutan. And in July 2018, Tobgay paid his last official visit to New Delhi where he met Modi and the Indian ministers for external affairs, finance, railways and power, and the National Security Adviser.¹¹

⁶ Two members were disqualified during the nomination process.

⁷ "Upper House Polls in Bhutan Reflect a Desire for Change", *The Wire*, 21 April 2018. <https://thewire.in/south-asia/upper-house-polls-in-bhutan-reflect-a-desire-for-change>. Accessed on 21 September 2018.

⁸ "The problem of distrust", *Kuensel*, 27 August 2018. <http://www.kuenselonline.com/the-problem-of-distrust/>. Accessed on 21 September 2018.

⁹ "Bhutan Election Results: Strategic Shift Needed From India", *Daily Hunt*, 17 September 2018. <https://m.dailyhunt.in/news/india/english/social+post+english-epaper-socposen/bhutan+election+results+strategic+shift+needed+from+india-newsid-97100149>. Accessed on 17 September 2018.

¹⁰ "India-Bhutan Relations", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, http://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral_Brief_Jan_2018.pdf. Accessed on 22 September 2018.

¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan, "Official visit of H.E. Dasho Tshering Tobgay, Hon'ble Prime Minister, to India, 5-7 July 2018", 8 July 2018. <http://www.mfa.gov.bt/?p=5710>. Accessed on 3 September 2018.

Tobgay's strong ties with India were also reflected in his party's election manifesto which stated, "Our [Bhutan's] foreign policy shall prioritize strengthening our time-tested friendship with India. We shall foster good relations with the neighboring Indian states of West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Sikkim and Bihar to ensure the safety of Bhutanese travelling through these states and improve business relations and people-to-people interactions."¹²

Even before Tobgay became the prime minister, there was generally strong and regular engagement between India and Bhutan. However, there were several hiccups in their bilateral relationships then. During Jigme Thinley's leadership, for example, Bhutan tried to establish links with China. This infuriated India which cut fuel subsidies to Bhutan in 2013.¹³

Politically, Tobgay's loss is not likely to significantly affect India-Bhutan bilateral relationships. The nature of their relationship is such that, regardless of the party in power, the prime minister generally would take steps to enhance the country's ties with India. This is because of Bhutan's geographical location and its traditional relationships with India. As a landlocked country, the country depends on Kolkata riverine port in India for its trade. Also, it relies on India's assistance to develop its infrastructure and pursue growth.¹⁴

On the relationship with India, the DPT's election manifesto stated, "[The Party will] remain committed to maintaining and furthering the excellent relations with the people and the Government of India; carry forward the exemplary and mutually beneficial cooperation that is the hallmark of our [India-Bhutan] relations and deepen our economic ties."¹⁵ While the manifesto of the DNT, the top performer in the elections, did not specifically mention foreign policy and international diplomacy, it mentioned the development of hydro infrastructure in

¹² "Unity. Stability. Prosperity", People's Democratic Party Manifesto 2018. <http://www.ecb.bt/pp/pdp/pdp-manifesto2018.pdf>. Accessed on 22 September 2018.

¹³ "Bhutan elections watched closely by India, China". *The Straits Times*, Nirmala Ganapathy, 21 September 2018. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/bhutan-elections-watched-closely-by-india-china>. Accessed on 21 September 2018.

¹⁴ For details, see "Committee on External Affairs (2017-18) Sixteenth Lok Sabha – Ministry of External Affairs Demand for Grants (2018-19) Twenty First Report", *Lok Sabha Secretariat*. http://164.100.47.193/lsscommittee/External%20Affairs/16_External_Affairs_21.pdf. Accessed on 22 March 2018; and "Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan, Annual Report 2016-17", Government of Bhutan. <https://www.rma.org.bt/RMA%20Publication/Annual%20Report/annual%20report%20%202016-2017.pdf>. Accessed on 28 March 2018.

¹⁵ "In Pursuit of Gross National Happiness: Equity and Justice", Druk Phuensum Tshogpa Manifesto 2018. <http://www.ecb.bt/pp/dpt/dptmanifesto2018.pdf>. Accessed on 22 September 2018.

Bhutan with India's assistance. It also highlighted the development and use of reservoir-based hydropower to meet the peak electricity demand in India.¹⁶

In spite of these expressions of close ties, the Bhutanese have expressed concerns about India's activities in Bhutan such as the construction of the multipurpose hydropower projects and increasing hydroelectricity debts.¹⁷ These concerns were, in fact, reflected in the DNT's manifesto, which mentioned the hydropower debts and "limited youth employment opportunities in the sector, especially in view of the nature of jobs".¹⁸ According to the 2016 report of the New Delhi-based Vasudha Foundation titled "A Study of the India-Bhutan Energy Cooperation Agreements and the Implementation of Hydropower Projects in Bhutan", the Bhutanese alleged that the Indian hydropower companies bring trained Indians to work at their sites instead of providing training and employing them.¹⁹ The DNT manifesto also called for an enhancement of in-country capacity building of hydropower construction.

Bhutan is probably India's closest friend in South Asia – one which has not tried to play the 'China card' against it. During the Doklam crisis in 2017,²⁰ for example, when India and China were locked in a military stand-off in the area for almost two and a half months, the Bhutanese called for a peaceful settlement of the issue and did not act in any way to disregard India's "concerns and interests".²¹ However, following the crisis, a section of Bhutanese called for the establishment of diplomatic links with China.²² This has now gained traction in the country. In July 2018, China's Assistant Foreign Minister, Kong Xuanyou, visited

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See "More than Doklam Issue, Bhutan worries about hydropower deficits", Tenzing Lamsang, *The Indian Express*, 26 July 2017. <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/more-than-the-doklam-issue-bhutan-worried-about-hydropower-deficits-4768598/> Accessed on 27 July 2017.

¹⁸ "Narrowing the Gap" Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa Manifesto 2018. file:///C:/Users/isasar/Downloads/DNT-Manifesto-2018-1%20(2).pdf. Accessed on 22 September 2018, pp 22-30.

¹⁹ A Study of the India-Bhutan Energy Cooperation Agreements and the Implementation of Hydropower Projects in Bhutan' Vasudha Foundation, January 2016. http://www.vasudha-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Final-Bhutan-Report_30th-Mar-2016.pdf. Accessed on 28 March 2018.

²⁰ Doklam/Doko-La (or Donglong) is a plateau of approximately 89 square kilometres, which lies at the tri-junction of India, China and Bhutan. It is close to India's 'Chicken's Neck', the Siliguri Corridor. From 16 June 2017 to 28 August 2017, India and China engaged in a military stand-off in the area.

²¹ "Sino-Indian De-escalation of the Doklam Crisis: Nuances of the Geopolitical Context", P S Suryanarayana, ISAS Insights 463, 5 September 2017. https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/media/isas_papers/ISAS%20Insights%20No.%20463-%20Sino-India%20De-escalation%20of%20the%20Doklam%20Crisis-Nuances%20of%20the%20Geopolitical%20Context.pdf. Accessed on 24 September 2018.

²² "Bhutan elections watched closely by India, China". *The Straits Times*, op. cit.

Bhutan. He was accompanied by Luo Zhaohui, China’s Ambassador to India.²³ Although Bhutan kept India “in the loop”²⁴ on the visit, there have been a degree of unease in India on the visit and on Bhutan’s ties with China. Earlier, in June 2012, when then-Bhutanese Prime Minister Thinley met with then-Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, it set off alarm bells in New Delhi.²⁵ The Indians remain extremely sensitive to any overtures, perceived or otherwise, by Bhutan and China to move close to each other.

Conclusion

Unlike the DPT which was in power from 2008 to 2013, the DNT is a relatively new entrant to the electoral politics of Bhutan. This left-of-centre party was formed in January 2013 and finished third in the primary elections for the National Assembly in that year. This year, it rose to finish top in the primary polls and earned the right to compete with the DPT for the leadership of the country.

Some Indian commentators have interpreted Tobgay’s defeat as a “surprise” for India.²⁶ However the Bhutanese had seen it coming, given the anti-incumbency sentiments in the country. Regardless of the leadership change, the Bhutanese leadership will pursue a friendly foreign policy towards India. On its part, India will need to make the effort to show the Bhutanese that it is also keen in maintaining strong ties with the tiny Himalayan kingdom.

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²³ “Assistant Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou Visits Bhutan, 2018/07/24”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1580397.shtml. Accessed on 3 September 2018.

²⁴ “China Minister arrives in Bhutan on first top-level visit after Doklam”, Shubajit Roy, *The Indian Express*, 24 July 2018. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/china-minister-arrives-in-bhutan-on-first-top-level-visit-after-doklam-5272450/>. Accessed on 26 July 2018.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See “India needs to boost efforts as Bhutan polls spring a surprise”, Indrani Bagchi, *The Times of India*, 17 September 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-keeps-close-eye-as-bhutan-polls-spring-surprise-result/articleshow/65831694.cms>. Accessed on 18 September 2018.