

ISAS Brief

No. 63 – Date: 3 April 2008

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



Bhutan: Marching Towards Democracy

S. D. Muni¹

The year 2008 may go down in the history of South Asia as the year of democratic institutionalisation and electoral processes. After Pakistan's elections on 18 February, Bhutan followed on 24 March and Nepal is all set to hold its first ever Constituent Assembly polls on 10 April. All these elections are a manifestation of the strong upsurge for democracy against the erstwhile autocratic governance in these countries. The case of Bhutan has, however, been different as the Bhutanese elections were cast in a unique political context. Unlike the situation in Nepal and Pakistan, the elections were not precipitated by any grassroots upsurge for political change and representative governance. The Bhutanese people were happy to be governed by their traditional monarchy whose criteria for development was defined by the unique concept of "Gross National Happiness", to contrast it with "Gross National Product", felt and enjoyed, not only materially but also "spiritually", by its people. Bhutan's call for democracy was a top-down gift to his people by the King, Jigme Singhye Wangchuk, much against the unwillingness and initial resistance by his ministers and associates as well as his subjects. Compare this with the Nepal King in Bhutan's close proximity, who was hell bent on going to any length in retaining his hold over power. He even resorted to direct rule under the pretext of dealing with the 10-year old Maoist insurgency. Also contrast the Bhutan King's initiative with the military regimes in Pakistan and Myanmar. While the former succumbed to the idea of democratic elections under severe domestic and international pressures, the latter has defied the international community, by and large, and suppressed the protests led by the monks on the question of accommodating democratic aspirations of the people.

Much before the culmination of democratic upsurge in its neighbourhood, the King of Bhutan decided in 2005 to open up his traditional monarchy to political liberalisation. He took the initiative to institute democracy by handing over executive power to elected representatives. Towards that goal, he launched the process of drafting a new constitution that made the King a constitutional head and transferred effective executive powers to an elected parliament. He went around his country discussing the draft constitution and pleading with his people to learn to rule themselves through their elected representatives. To the skeptics and indifferent masses, who seemed happy with the ways they were being traditionally governed, he argued the advantages of a representative system. The new Constitution makes it mandatory for the

¹ Professor S. D. Muni is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at isassdm@nus.edu.sg.

future Bhutanese Kings to retire at the age of 65. The King can also be removed by a two-third vote in the parliament. King Jigme Singhye Wangchuk himself abdicated in favour of his 26 years old eldest son, Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuk, in 2006. Political parties were reintroduced in April 2007 by lifting a 50-year old ban on them. Election to constitute the lower house of parliament was announced for March 2008.

There has, of course, been political pressure from the people for democracy in Bhutan decades before the King's initiative. The Bhutan State Congress launched a futile popular movement for democracy during the early 1950s. Again during the early 1990s, Bhutan witnessed a democratic struggle which was effectively put down. Both these earlier movements had been dominated by the Nepalis living in southern Bhutan and, accordingly, there was a clear ethnic dimension to them, directed against the Drukpa people and their traditional monarchy. The possibility of these movements being in the background of King Jigme Singhye's initiative cannot be ruled out. But the trigger for his move must have been provided by the events in his neighbourhood where centuries of autocratic monarchical rule had turned people violent, giving rise to the Maoist insurgency. There have also been growing concern about the possibility of Maoist influence and infiltration among the ranks of the Bhutanese refugees settled in United Nations camps in Nepal since the early 1990s. The King could also sense the unfolding aspects of globalisation where democracy and human rights had come to acquire centre stage in political discourse. One would not know the succession tensions within the Royal family in Bhutan where court intrigues and jealousies had not been unheard phenomena. In all, it was being prudent and farsighted on the part of the King to decide in favour of broadening the base of authority and legitimacy before forces of history overtook the tiny Kingdom. The events in Tibet have borne out the wisdom of the King's moves.

The Bhutan elections are unique not only because they were ordered by the King, but also unlike in other South Asian countries, they are based on educational qualifications. Under the newly framed election laws, no one can contest parliamentary elections without having a graduate degree. Bhutan has very small graduate community of just 3,000 persons. This is also indicative of the fact that, in a country where literacy is still only 42 percent, the graduate community may mostly come from the upper and elite sections of the society. The degree of management of the elections was also evident in the screening of the contesting parties. One of the parties, the Druk Peoples' Unity Party, was disqualified due to what was described as a lack of "credible leadership". It was alleged that more than 75 percent of the party members were school dropouts. The elimination of the third party also reduced the two-stage electoral process into a direct one stage. According to election laws, the first stage of the elections was to filter out all but the two highest ranking (in terms of votes secured in the first stage) parties for the second and the final stage. The Election Commission had also disqualified a candidate of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) who tried to play up the problem of Bhutanis of Nepali origin. This was done to send a firm message that there was no room in Bhutan for communal and sectarian politics. There was a clear decision to keep the Nepali issue out of the political process. A person could not contest the elections if any of his/her parents were a migrant Bhutanese. Both the parents had to be Bhutan born. The electoral process was also kept free of religious issues as the monks were not eligible to vote. No wonder, there were no sensitive or contentious issues. In fact, there was not much to distinguish between the two major contenders, the PDP and the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) or Bhutan Peace Party. While the DPT promised a compact government, equal and just treatment to all the citizens and high standard for political conduct, the PDP tried to lure

the voters by offering them salary rise and infrastructure development, including an airport in eastern Bhutan.

It was a keenly contested election. Of more than 318,000 registered voters, 79.4 percent cast their votes. Even the King appealed for the exercise of franchise right by all the Bhutanese. Senior administrators actively participated in the campaign. People walked long distances from their homes to cast their votes. Some expatriate Bhutanese also came from the United States and Europe to participate in the elections. The Election Commission gave 100,000 Bhutanese Rupees to each of the candidates along with essential election material. In addition to this, a candidate could spend 100,000 Bhutanese Rupees of his/her own to boost his/her electoral prospects. The Election Commission also organised a television debate between the leaders of the contending parties. There were corruption charges by the DPT against PDP, saying that the latter was bribing the voters but such charges were stoutly countered.

Election results stunned all calculations. Analysts in Bhutan and India had expected a close fight, with the difference of not more than five to ten seats between the winner and the loser. Even the DPT, which emerged as the overwhelming winner, had not expected more than 30 seats in the 47 contested ones. It finally won 45 seats and the PDP which was routed, won only two seats. The PDP has asked for re-poll or, at least, a serious investigation into the factors that caused such a landslide in favour of the DPT. This heavily-lopsided outcome has been attributed to various factors. Some have blamed automatic voting machines for their faulty mechanism or improper use. Others have given credit to the campaigning style of the DPT and the impressive articulation by its leader, Jigme Y. Thinley, in the debate as well as during the campaign. The DPT also had five of the senior ministers in its ranks, and impression went around that this party had the real blessings of the King, though the PDP had a leadership related to the royal family. The active canvassing by senior civil servants for the DPT further confirmed this impression. Since the election was seen as a gift from the King, the voters chose the party that was seen as the King's real party.

Bhutan's top-down experiment in democracy, therefore, starts with a parliament having an extremely weak opposition. Even the two elected PDP members have threatened to resign if the causes of their party's rout are not sincerely investigated. To compensate for the weak opposition, the DPT leader and Prime Minister-elect has promised accountable, corruption-free and transparent governance down to the constituency level. He has assured that he will do everything to "establish firm foundations for a great democracy" under constitutional monarchy. He stated that, "We are all subjects of one King. And in this small country, we are all family".

While the international community has welcomed the democratic initiative of Bhutan, some criticism has been leveled at the neglect of Nepali refugees who have been languishing for years in Nepal and India. More than a 100,000 of the refugees were not included in the voters list and were not allowed to participate in the elections. Even according to the Bhutanese government's official position, while most of these refugees were illegal migrants into Bhutan, some of them could be Bhutanese citizens. What about their voting rights? These refugees have been infiltrated by extremist elements, including members of Bhutan Communist Party, closely affiliated to the Nepal Maoists. They tried to disrupt the elections by exploding bombs in various parts of Bhutan since January 2008 and on the eve of elections. These extremists have been opposing third party solution to the refugee problem wherein these refugees would be repatriated to the United States (about 60,000) and about

20,000 in some of the European countries. The process of repatriating these refugees to the West has already begun.

The ethnic issue, though was kept carefully out of the electoral process, will need to be addressed seriously by the new democratic establishment. There are nine Nepali members of the DPT elected to the parliament but this is far less of the population size of the Nepalis in Bhutan, even after excluding the Nepal-based refugees. The disbursement of refugees will not resolve Bhutan's ethnic issue if the Nepalis living in Bhutan and accepted as Bhutanese citizens are not given a sense of belonging and equal participation in its political and economic life. Though Bhutan is the second richest South Asian country in terms of per-capita income (of approximately US\$1,200), there are wide income gaps in the society. Judicious policy initiatives will be needed to bridge these gaps if social harmony and "national happiness" are to be ensured.

The new government will also confront a foreign policy challenge in the form of an assertive and sensitive China. Bhutan's boundary issue with China remains to be resolved. There have been discussions between Bhutan and China on the issue and much of the tension areas have been sorted out but its final resolution is linked to the resolution of Sino-Indian boundary question due to tri-junctions and historical imperatives. The revival of the Tibet issue has the potential of vitiating the Sino-Indian boundary question. China has also built up an impressive spread of infrastructure in the Himalayas, with roads reaching the Bhutanese borders. There have been Bhutanese objections to some of the road links creeping into the areas claimed by Bhutan. Intrusion by Chinese shepherds into Bhutan's pasture lands had also raised tensions between them on a number of occasions earlier.

As for India, a stable, democratising, friendly and confident Bhutan is the best security asset in the turbulent Himalayas. India recently revised its treaty relations with Bhutan to the satisfaction of the Kingdom. While India has been supporting Bhutan's gradual transition to democracy, the Prime Minister-elect of Bhutan, Jigmye Thinlay, has promised to further strengthen the "unique friendship and understanding" prevailing between the two countries.

oooOOOooo