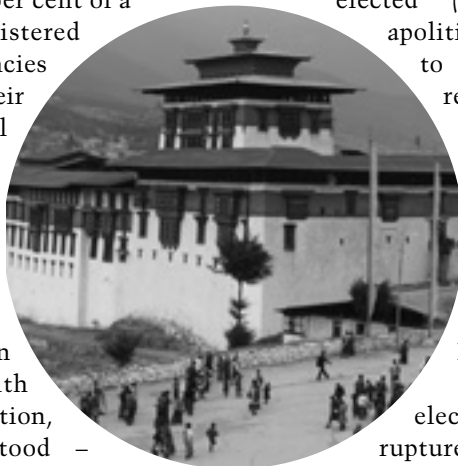


Power to the People

Nitasha Kaul describes the remarkable arrival of democracy in Bhutan

In 2008 Bhutan completed a peaceful transition to a parliamentary democracy. Initiated by the monarch, the process was unique: a voluntary abdication of power in the face of public opposition to democracy. (Indeed, had a referendum on the desirability of a transition to democracy been held at the time of the elections it would have failed).

On 24 March, 79.4 per cent of a total of 318,465 registered voters, in 47 constituencies in 20 provinces, cast their ballot in a general election. Some had taken out bank loans to finance trips of hundreds of kilometres to be able to vote in their native provinces. The election – in which, in line with the Bhutanese constitution, only two parties stood – produced the first democratically chosen 47-seat National Assembly (NA), or lower house. The people voted overwhelmingly for the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) – (*Druk* means dragon; the native name for Bhutan is *Druk Yul*, or ‘land of the thunder dragon’) – which won 45 out of the 47 NA seats. The DPT’s leader, Jigme Y. Thinley, whose leadership and charismatic personality undoubtedly helped the DPT win, is the new prime minister. The PDP (People’s



Democratic Party) won 2 seats, forming the smallest opposition of the world’s youngest democracy. The portfolios for the 11-member cabinet were announced in April; the first sitting of the NA was held in May 2008.

Earlier, in December 2007 and January 2008, twenty of the 25 members of the upper house, the National Council, were elected (NC members are apolitical and not affiliated to any party); the remaining five, the king’s nominees, were announced in March 2008. (The NC candidate with the largest margin of victory was a woman, Pema Lhamo.)

The democratic elections marked not a rupture with, but an evolution of, governance mechanisms that had, in preceding decades, introduced decentralized and participatory decision-making. The National Assembly was set up in 1953; the Royal Advisory Council in 1965. Bhutan introduced its first five-year plan in 1961; in 1971 it joined the UN. The fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who inherited the kingdom as a teenager in 1972, continued the reforms begun by his father. Bhutan introduced its own currency, the

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ngultrum, in 1974. In 1981, DYT (District Development Committees) and in 1991 GYT (Block Development Committees, which work at the level of the *gewog* or smallest administrative unit) were established, which created stronger local government.

Since the 1960s, Bhutan has gradually engaged with a growing number of international bodies. The big change came in 1998, when the king dissolved the government and transferred his executive powers to a new executive council of ministers. In 1999, TV and the internet were allowed into Bhutan. Then, in 2001, the king initiated the drafting of a constitution. This document underwent extensive public consultation in the following years; its adoption is currently being debated in the National Assembly.

In 2005, Jigme Singye Wangchuck stunned the nation with the announcement that there would be a transition to a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarch.

In 2006 he abdicated in favour of his son, the fifth and present king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. In April and May 2007 mock elections were held in order to acquaint people with the practice of elections: voters were asked to choose from amongst four fictional parties – Druk Yellow, Druk Red, Druk Green, and Druk Blue; school students were the mock candidates but the electronic voting



machines used were real. Yellow is the colour of royalty: almost everyone voted for the Druk Yellow party; it is likely that they would have felt uncomfortable voting for anything else.

Organizations such as the Anti Corruption Commission and the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) ran innumerable voter education programmes and awareness campaigns – on TV and the radio and in the print media – about the dangers of political corruption, coercion, and bribery (for example, community votes being solicited in return for power tillers, or voters being misled into thinking that voting machines record voters' identities as they vote).

At the core of democracy, as generally understood, is participatory decision-making coupled with symbolic representation in the institutions that exercise power; for this reason, in the political imagination democracy is seen as synonymous with people power.

Bhutan does not fit this model. Bhutan's transition to democracy was *not* the product of a popular movement for democracy; there was no demand for 'democracy as a right'. Instead, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the fourth king, handed over his powers to the people, and made sure that the constitution contained a provision for any king to retire at the age of 65 (he is 52 himself). The Bhutanese were prevailed upon to accept 'democracy as a responsibility' – a 'gift' from the throne that the people must nurture. Voting was presented to the people as their 'sacred right', a *norbu* (precious jewel) to be handled with care. The fifth king issued a *kasho* (royal edict) before the elections that exhorted people to exercise their franchise, and do so responsibly. There was emphasis on the creation of a 'vibrant democracy' as the foundation of a strong economy.

Why did the Bhutanese want the monarchy to continue? In part, because they worry about the divisiveness that democracy can produce: in unstable democracies (in the region and beyond), violence, strikes, corruption, and all kinds of politicking appear to make life miserable. (Bhutanese are informed about the world: there are 30 international channels on Bhutanese TV, including BBC and CNN, and only one national channel, the

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BHUTAN

Bhutan is a small (about 40,000 square kilometers in size), landlocked country in the eastern Himalayas; it is bordered on the north by Tibet in China, on the south by India. The over half a million Bhutanese (divided into three main ethnic groups: the Ngalops in the west, the Sharchops in the east, and the Lhotsampas in the south) have a distinct sense of identity and culture, which is reinforced by both geography and history. Buddhism spread to Bhutan following the visit of Guru Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) in the eight century of the Christian Era /AD. About 900 years later, in the

seventeenth century, the dynamic leader Zhabdrung Nagawang Namgyal, who had come from Tibet, unified the country and instituted a dual system of secular and religious administration (*choesi nyiden*). The effects of European imperialism, which shook large parts of Asia in subsequent centuries, were tangential in Bhutan until the start of the twentieth century, when, in 1907, partly with British support and with general consent, the Bhutanese monarchy was established. This was the founding of the Wangchuck dynasty. The present King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck is the fifth Druk Gyalpo.

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Bhutan Broadcasting Service, which is on for a few hours each day.)

In undemocratic Bhutan, by contrast, life was better than it is in many democracies. (In the more than one hundred years of the Wangchuck dynasty's rule [1907–2008], a new, hereditary, monarch took the throne only four times: in 1926, 1952, 1972, and 2006). The state has provided substantial support for the population: education and healthcare are free, and until recently, educated people could get comfortable, permanent jobs of their choice in the civil service. While there is poverty in rural areas, there is no starvation (partly because of the strength of communities). Every Bhutanese had a right of final appeal to the king, and it was common for the landless to be granted land under the *kidu* (welfare) system.

Guided by the development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), which sees growth as a means to overall well-being, the new government has its work cut out. In a small domestic market it has to deliver better services to the population; the development of the country's infrastructure is hampered by a difficult terrain (a conservation commitment made in the constitution means 60 per cent of the country will remain under forest cover in perpetuity; and Bhutan's major resource and revenue earner is hydropower, which cannot be transported overseas); trade is affected by Bhutan's being landlocked between two rising powers, China and India, each with different approaches to governance; and international relations are conducted with development partners (aid-donor nations).

Bhutan has not blindly emulated development elsewhere. Not only has the pace of modernization been slow enough to avoid massive upheavals, but also modern trends have been 'indigenized'. For example, on the *Norling* private TV channel, Bhutanese fashion models walk the ramp in their *ghos* and *kiras* (traditional male and female dress); sometimes they also wear traditional masks. In the

auditions for the 'Bhutanese Idol' TV show that began in April 2008, contestants competed in the three Bhutanese music genres: *zhungdra* (classical); *boedra* (folk); and *rigsar* (modern).



Public culture is – for the present, at least – not confrontational. This is evident, for example, in the ECB rules for the live presidential campaign TV debates: the audience was asked to not jeer or cheer (people understood that cheering one speaker might be construed as an insult to the opponent). Similarly, the two political parties voluntarily decided

'In undemocratic Bhutan life was better than it is in many democracies'

not to have political rallies (in a small society heavily charged political rivalry does not appeal to anyone).

What will be the likely characteristics of a democracy inherited as a 'responsibility' and not a 'right'? People will have high expectations of the new system that they have been persuaded to adopt; there is a strong chance that they will be disillusioned if promises are not kept. Local matters will be important: for example, the distance of settlements from the nearest road-head (this affects how quickly

agricultural produce can be brought to markets); the maintenance of water channels, *lhakhangs* (temples) and mule tracks; increased rural electrification; and crop insurance.

In urban areas, the challenge is greater. In the absence of extended rural farming family setup, people have to be persuaded to care about their democracy as a responsibility; and there are specific long-standing problems on which government has to make progress (in addition to the universal problems such as unemployment and rural–urban migration, which will be addressed in the tenth five year plan, beginning in 2008). These problems include dust pollution from increasing construction; getting people to volunteer to help put out forest fires; stray dogs; and solid waste disposal (a landfill site near Thimphu, the capital, built in 1993 with a capacity of 8 metric tons per day for 10 years is still being used today – with waste levels at 35 tons per day).

In the years ahead, under the new governance system of parliamentary democracy, the notion of a Bhutanese 'national interest' may coalesce around the categories of sovereignty, economy, and the environment; accordingly, government policies may focus on reducing aid dependence by diversifying the economy; curbing corruption – especially in the construction industry, where it is perceived to be most rampant; lowering unemployment amongst urban youth; generating revenue by developing private sector enterprises; promoting commerce in those Bhutanese goods and services that have a niche market; and using resources wisely – for example, hydropower. The next five years (until elections in 2013) will test the performance of the world's youngest, almost unwilling, and yet awesome democracy.

Dr Nitasha Kaul, a visiting research fellow at CSD, visits Bhutan frequently. She was in Bhutan for the whole election campaign. She is the author of Snapshots of a Changing Kingdom: Democracy and Identity in Bhutan (forthcoming).