

Democracy in Bhutan

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Too much has been written about democracy. Still, many in Bhutan (both before and after 2008) crave a closer understanding – an education - of the relevance of this new approach to public policy.

In this life, and in this age, we need to hone our abilities for change management. In overview, one may prefer the notion of “democracy with Bhutan characteristics” or “*Kidu* (Benefits granted by His Majesty The King of Bhutan) democracy”. Looking ahead, perhaps we should look again at our villages and reflect on “*zomdu* democracy”.

Why so? Here I gather some points, in no special order, and with folded hands ask for careful review by the reader.

Remember the core issue, His Majesty The Fourth King’s constant and insistent focus¹:

What is going on in Bhutan is not democratisation as foreigners see it... I prefer not to talk of political changes as foreigners do - these are natural changes... It is very important for the people to understand why it is imperative that they govern themselves ... We can’t impose things on them – they must come to understand themselves where their interest lies...

In this sense, Bhutan’s “new democracy” - the constitution-making process, the constitution itself and, its prescribed modality of representative-selection with checks and balances, and indeed all that has come up from 2006 - are natural evolutions of native tendencies², accommodating to new circumstances and needs, at a conducive time.

The notion of the middle-path, of balance, is never absent, although this is always (and must be) a theme of aspiration rather than of completed strategy.

Democracy for Bhutan – even more than elsewhere - is and must be a process, not a fixed and unchanging set of rules, of self-evolution and self-government that is consistent with the *Tsa-wa-Sum* (The King, Country, and People).

¹ Audience, 03 January 2002.

² Note the perceptive article on native democracy, A proposition “Bhutan is a Democracy”: Beyond the Constricted, Popular Wisdom of “Democracy”, Katsu Masaki, Journal of Bhutan Studies, 29 (winter 2013), pp 2-34, at <http://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt/journal-of-bhutan-studies-volume-29-winter-2013/>

Democracy for Bhutan might indeed best be defined, at least academically, by what it is not. Yet, inevitably, in this life and in this society, there are bumps in the road.

After the June, 2018, meeting of the National Assembly, the “five in orange” – the former ministers from pre-2008 days, albeit now four and in opposition role – will retire. Ahead of the elections in the last quarter of 2018, Bhutan will indeed be entering a new phase of governance. Before 2008, there was the question of how Bhutan’s civil servants would react to being given orders by “mere politicians”. After all, the ministers up to March, 2008, were all civil servants, basically unaccountable except to His Majesty The King as Head of State.

What is now the Bhutan Consensus? Indeed, is there such? If not, how can the people’s will be gathered and find expression, and how can the people – rather than one man or woman – control and direct their collective livelihoods and destiny? Is this even feasible, in a traditionally hierarchical society?

The starting point is the certain understanding of His Majesty The Fourth King (and his father before him, and His Majesty The King after him) that it was not good for the people to be ruled by one man. The process of political change to a constitutional system that was activated by His Majesty The Fourth King had been deeply considered. The Constitutional drafting process itself was comprehensive, but as noted by many it was not easy to fully understand.

A cogent commentary on Bhutan’s prospects for democracy was published by Tashi Wangchuk before the present Constitution was decided and made effective in 2008³. The passage of a decade and a half has not diminished the relevancy and strength of his arguments but rather confirmed them as especially relevant today. He asserted, and elaborated, four theses:

1. Village society is fundamentally democratic
2. The state administration is bureaucratic and authoritarian
3. The state can be democratised by formalising customary institutions, and
4. Bhutan cannot be democratised by external forces.

Tashi Wangchuk also observed that

The *zomdu*, by its very design, is an open forum for participation and negotiation, and all decisions are negotiated settlements, which at times may favour local elites but at other times can work against them ...

³ Tashi Wangchuk, *Asian Survey*, XLIV, 6 (November/December 2004), pp 836-855.

At the interface between village and state, or between the people and the state, the relationship is non-democratic... Social checks that are highly effective in controlling concentrations and abuses of power in the village have a limited ability to control power abuses by the state...[so] the village, in its relationship with the state, engages in strategic resistance.⁴

The essence of the democratic impulse is to constrain the power of the few by asserting the will and authority of the (informed) many (the public). If it exists at all, its roots must indeed be found in the *zomdu*; there is more to be said below.

The present Leader of the Opposition recently astutely observed that “we [MPs] are all accidental politicians”. The two governments to date in constitutional Bhutan have been graduates (as all candidates for parliament must be) but often have had little detailed experience of public policy decision-making or indeed of the wider world of public affairs. Most have not come naturally to the notion of political accommodation.

The Committee system of the National Assembly has had only a middling success to date, in terms of power and authority delegated to the committees by the Assembly. While it is positive to note that reports from several committees are now publicly available, there are no reports from 5 of the 11 committees⁵.

The rule of law is an essential component underlying any system claiming to be democratic. The former Chief Justice, Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye, did a very good job in renovating and strengthening basic structures and rules for the judicial hierarchy, but there still are too few strongly qualified and experienced legal persons, and there has been confusion in several cases in recent months. While the strengthening of the system proposed by the Bhutan Law School in Paro will be enhanced from 2020 when its first graduates appear, they too will need to gather several further years of practical experience to hone their academic knowledge. If public confidence flags for whatever reason, the door is widened for arbitrary misuse of authority and for injustice (with disaffection for authority) to grow.

The issues of devolution of power to the localities are still a work in progress. From bottom to top, it is encouraging to note the increasing use of social media (notably WeChat and others), which enable persons in rural areas to communicate with their MPs or even to become part of a circle of like-minded individuals to discuss matters of common interest. Social media in this case helps destroy the tyranny of distance and breaks down any sense of isolation.

4 Ibid., p 855.

5 <http://www.nab.gov.bt/en/content/committee-reports>

A View from Thailand

With the above considerations in mind, we can glance abroad. Not so long ago, the respected Thai elder statesman and former Prime Minister Khun Anand Panyarachun gave a wise and eloquent speech⁶ to members of the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand, about some conditions for the “new normal” in his country. Despite the significant differences in the circumstances of the two countries, many of the comments are relevant to Bhutan. It is worth reviewing the main points. There were, he said, four essential elements of the “new normal” in the development of his country.

First, the need to ensure “sustainable and widespread” economic development, with closer attention to the quality rather than the quantity of economic growth.

Secondly, there should be promotion of “an open and inclusive society”. He cited the American libertarian James Bovard’s observation that “Democracy must be something more than a few wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for dinner”.

Liberty and equal rights are not simply about the right to vote. The demands and views of everyone must be heard and respected – not just those of the victors in elections. Majoritarian rule does not give a mandate to the winning party to do as it please in a winner-takes-all fashion.

Importantly, Khun Anand noted that the role of media in serving as “an unbiased and objective platform for voicing different views and perspectives in a balanced manner” was “critical”.

The third element was respect for the rule of law: “We must have rule of law rather than rule by law”, requiring respect for the spirit of the law as well as its underlying moral principles. “Where the rule of law is weak, corruption flourishes”.

An independent judiciary is fundamental for the rule of law. If judges use one law for the powerful and another for the powerless, the entire political and judicial system is compromised, and the people’s trust in the government to see justice served is eroded.

⁶ *Striving for a democratic ‘new normal’*, full text in *Bangkok Post*, 24 March 2016.

Fourthly, there was “a need to recalibrate the balance of power between the state and the people”.

Governance through the rule of law together with public accountability and transparency form the basis of responsible government [...] Representative government lies at the core of true democracy. It can occur only when there is comprehensive decentralisation and local political empowerment.

Khun Anand went on to stress that the success of decentralisation depended on a balanced and diverse flow of information:

An active civil society provides a mechanism whereby the collective views of citizens can shape and influence government policy [...] A vibrant civil society relies on the wisdom of the populace and its ability to make rational and informed decisions...

In this connection, he spoke of the need to “urgently reform our education system” into one that “nurtures the ability of people to think critically and make constructive changes in society”.

In the case of Thailand, he observed, “we have paid little attention to developing the institutions that are critical to sustaining democracy”.

Finally,

A constitution is not a silver bullet for all that ails society [...] society must first embrace the underlying values it espouses [...] People must want democracy for it to take hold [...] Democratic governance is ultimately a state of mind, rather than a set of tangible rules or procedures [...] moving forward requires that we [...] embrace openness, a diversity of views, as well as values that support societal change.

Overall, Khun Anand noted, the public should be mindful of the “sufficiency economy” espoused by the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej, “in terms of its key principles of moderation, rationality, and immunity”.

If we swivel the mirror held by Khun Anand away from Thailand and onto Bhutan, is the picture much different? Are problems and prospects so dissimilar?

The “sufficiency economy” of the late King Rama IX is not so different in broadest outline from Gross National Happiness notion as it has evolved in

Bhutan – how to optimise limited resources to give maximum benefit to the people, how to optimise the talents of each person for the benefits of the community, and how the community itself may thrive with its component parts and provide effective feedback support, so that the whole community becomes indeed more than the sum of its parts.

As for economic development, new roads and electricity have helped enormously to advance communities. This, and urban construction, is good business for banks, but there are also consequences.

Second, an open and inclusive society. There is more work to be done.

Third, respect for the rule of law. There is certainly scope for improvement.

Fourth, “balance of power between the state and the people”. The tendency of Thimphu-based politicians and officials is – more and more - to concentrate power and authority at the centre. Changing an institutional mindset is not easy to do. As the Germans acknowledged at the time of unprecedented refugee influx, “words have to be found” to understand and deal with this “new situation”.

Not only have writers begun discussing the relevance of a “middle path” approach: they continue to tweet and blog⁷ about it to growing audiences.

Overall, of course material progress has been made, yet much more needs to be done. There are costs. It is important that there be wider and more vigorous debate on these issues.

What is to be done? Electors may well scrutinise candidates for their individual strengths and utility, rather than their party affiliation; candidates may move from one party to another to enhance the likelihood of success at the polls; parties as such may become entities whose platforms are seen as almost identical leaking umbrellas and whose manifestos are worthless, full of self-serving and cynically false promises.

After 2008 there were voices raised from time to time yearning for a return to a consensus spirit.

⁷ The Community of Bhutanese Bloggers (CBB) lists 54 sites on its smart-phone app Bhutan Bloggers; the CBB also has a FaceBook presence (<https://m.facebook.com/groups/1605595783044478/>). Also, notably, Dorji Wangchuk has consistently proposed a middle path of journalism: see e.g. <http://dorjiwangchuk.blogspot.hk/2015/10/middle-path-journalism-conceptual.html?m=1>

The Bhutan Democratic Dialogue (BDD) proposed a non-conflictual approach to political competition. Yet more recently there are those to seek to impose a discussion-averse approach to important national issues. Thus, foreign affairs is an issue that concerns all citizens, at least in outline. Relations of Bhutan with its two large friendly neighbours deserves constant alertness. Bhutan has its own national interests, starting and ending with survival. She maintains friendship with both large neighbouring powers, even at a time when those powers seem unable or unwilling to resolve their differences, and the public of one or the other seek to suborn Bhutan exclusively to its side. The public must discuss, and should be kept well informed on, issues from abroad that may affect their security or livelihoods. In the contemporary context, this is a major task and responsibility of the print and visual media, and not to be shirked. The prospects for, and possible threats or limits to, Bhutan's sovereignty – including growth of extreme nationalistic tendencies in neighbouring societies – must be clearly understood by the public at large.

How to include the monk bodies in the broader body politic, deprived of a vote as they are? Their work and role has rather passive and ceremonial aspects. Attempts at reforms of the monk bodies made by His Majesty The Third King (and afterwards) foundered on conservative resistance by the then religious leaders. Is it again time to encourage those to find advantage in a more proactive involvement with society? It is no longer wholly admirable, in the eyes of a youthful society, to retreat to caves for mere personal fulfilment. As a start, let some be trained in basics of first-aid, for example. Religious ritual in this life would become more meaningful and lifted above mere superstition. *Lams* (lamas) and *animis* (nuns) would gain a new level of respect from the community for such work.

Overall, the Monarch guides, suggests, assists, aids, encourages, helps resolve, gives face, serves the short, medium and long-term interests of the whole community and its various people. The MPs – the people's representatives – are the vital filter of popular aspirations, and have both a duty of reception of local desires and a duty of informing local people of the broader context. The public themselves have the duty and obligation to rise above self-interests and consider the wider communal interests. How to achieve this? Education, an investment in the future as always remarked – not an investment in monetised robots.

The utility of the democratic ideal diminishes as a system unless the populace is well educated, “tuned in” (and focused on other than their mobile phones), alert to public policy and the wider world.

Pay the local officials and the MPs whatever is needed to curb or limit corruption: assert policies that constrain the short-term “advantages” of corruption.

Kidu and Zomdu

Kidu democracy and *zomdu* democracy support each other as institutions, and together they underpin “democracy with Bhutan characteristics”. *Kidu* is the essence of the present stage of democracy with Bhutanese characteristics. The role of the Monarch is in effect as a benign parallel government, not at odds with the parliamentary political system but directly complementing it. *Kidu* democracy is the facilitator for *zomdu* democracy.

Zomdu is the institution for grassroots measurement and understanding of power. That involves understanding both the need for, and the utility of, political accommodation for a higher communal good. *Kidu* democracy and its institutions bolster – but do not replace – the ultimate source of political legitimacy. The role of political parties – ideally – is to channel the collective aspirations of the *zomdu* to the realm of public policy through the electoral representative system.

The tension between the individualism encouraged by the party system and the consensus encouraged by the *zomdu* system is ideally a creative tension, providing a dynamic context for civil society groups to articulate and focus their specialist interests and desires of public policy.

A Suggestion

In the not-far distant future, one may perhaps envisage a “*zhung zomdu*”, not as “government *zomdu*” but indeed as a true “heart/central *zomdu*” coming together at national level, to assert a consensus resolution on carefully curated (by local leaders, not the centre) public issues of strategic import in all spheres. These discussions and decisions might enhance the content of any future five-year plans, and could directly inform the politicians of their proper role as agents of popular desires on national policy. Politicians would be able to make their own inputs to the discussions. Such a “new Bhutan Consensus” would naturally be subject to further periodic refinement as circumstances evolved. The *zhung zomdu* would not compete with or threaten the responsibilities of the elected “agents of change” but would enhance the unspoken social contract between the public and these agents: a consensus on an issue would constitute a new *genja* (agreement).

Strengthening and extending the role of *zomdus* does not mean treading the path of India's ill-fated 1960s Panchayati Raj programme that by 1970 had failed (for reasons worth noting):

Firstly, the bureaucracy, local vested interests and the elected representatives in [State Legislature and Parliament] did not take kindly to the [Panchayati Raj Institutions], whose ascendancy they feared. Secondly, since the Panchayats were created ... as vehicles for rural development rather than as units of self-government, they had no real autonomy [...] Third, there was a strong tendency in India [...] to concentrate power at the Centre to an excessive degree. [...] Fourthly, many state governments [failed to] hold elections to the PRIs for years together under one pretext or the other. [...] Fifthly, there was also a feeling that PRIs [were] dominated by [...] privileged sections of society [...] Finally, [...] even the local people themselves were not adequately educated to understand the role and the importance of the PRIs.⁸

In Bhutan, one should not quickly underestimate the wisdom of the rural people on issues that count. In the past, there has been a relative lack of intellectual articulation on major public issues, perhaps as a function of the diminished level of education, or an absence of a clear sense of national history, or the country's relative isolation, or the stress on "localism" as the focus of attention.

Conclusion

Khun Anand has indirectly held a mirror to contemporary Bhutan as well as to his own Kingdom. The question is: what is to be done? Our Kings have asserted that "we well know what the problems are. What we need to know is, what are the best solutions."

- » The people should "take ownership" of politicians.
- » Experienced and fledgling politicians should renew their understanding that their role is to serve the people – that is, the interests of the community rather than the individual (or themselves).
- » A *zhung zomdu*, well prepared and carried out with all the time needed for its good grounding and success, could give colour and strength to an especially Bhutanese form of democracy, reflecting the best of historic culture and local practice.

⁸ Palanithurai, Ganapathy (ed.) Dynamics of New Panchayati Raj System in India, Vol. III, Select states (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2004), pp. 112-113.

If it came to prove itself and flourish with time, this dynamic institution could make a major contribution to democracy with Bhutanese characteristics and further enhance the practical basis for governance under the over-arching philosophy of Gross National Happiness.

Perhaps an ideal to be worked towards can be found in the Swiss polity, where:

Voters tend to see politics as being about functions and institutions, not about personalities [...] politicians are judged above all on their ability to forge consensus and execute decisions.⁹

Could this also come to be true for Bhutan? That would surely be well received by Their Majesties and by The People. It is a goal to be cherished and worked towards.

9 Tett, Gillian, "Notebook", *Financial Times Weekend*, 03 March 2018 p.8.