

Dhar from the Throne: an Honour and a Responsibility

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The 203 gups (heads of county) who received the *Dhar* (scarf symbolising confer of rank) from His Majesty The King in October 2016, are negotiating a new era in Bhutanese politics. As one gup, a veteran of more than 20 years as a village headman, described it: “The situation between my early days and now is like the difference between the earth and the sky.”

This refers to both the political scenario that they are adjusting to as well as the profile of the gups themselves. It is not a comparison of two stages of recent Bhutanese history. It would be wrong to conclude that the current status of local government is “better” than the rural politics of the past. It would be equally wrong to surmise that the university graduate gup of today is more capable than the village elder of the past who assumed the post because he was trusted by the people. It is just that the criteria, like the concept of functional literacy, is changing with the times.

Gups of the past served their communities by drawing from the wisdom accumulated from their own and society’s experiences. There were dynamic gups who made a difference to their villages, gewogs (blocks), and dzongkhags (districts), and there were those who were apologies for rural leadership.

The political scenario today is by no means settled, and the role of the gup is as complex as that of Bhutanese leadership at all levels - complex given our limited experience in “government by the people”, and complex because we are learning by doing. The electoral process itself is a major task, and His Majesty The King personally congratulated all the citizens who took part in the democratic process as candidates and voters in the local government elections, a multi-million Ngultrum exercise.

A majority of the 203 men and two women who were elected in the last elections are new, but there has been a demographic shift. In the past, many literate gups were disrobed monks. Today, there are 25 university graduates, one with a postgraduate degree. The rest are “functionally literate”, meaning that they can read and write. One gup, who remembers being paid Nu 450 a month when he began his career, is getting Nu 20,000 today.

It is an opportunity of a lifetime, and on October 12, 2016, these elected local government leaders received the honour of being conferred the *Dhar* by His Majesty The King. This signifies the importance of the responsibilities of local government and leaders on the ground. But, more importantly — as His Majesty The King has repeatedly commanded — it symbolises the importance of their roles and their responsibilities to their communities and to the *Tsa-wa-Sum* (The King, country, and people).

The responsibility of the local government is outlined in the Constitution. Local leaders are empowered “to facilitate the direct participation of the people in the development and management of their own social, economic, and environmental well-being”. In other words, they play a critical role in keeping democracy alive.

The advantage of having local leaders is that local interests are taken into account in the national sphere of governance. His Majesty The King advised the gups to ensure the involvement of the people and communities in the democratic process by encouraging them to take active interest in matters of local governance.

It is expected that local leaders know local issues better than the central authorities. At the same time, the proximity gives the people the opportunity to keep the elected leaders accountable. It is healthy that local leaders will be constantly challenged over their decisions. That is what accountability is all about and that is why their incentives have been enhanced.

But central government leaders, politicians, bureaucrats, employees of constitutional posts, and the citizens of our new democracy need to understand the real mandate. Unlike societies that experimented with democracy for decades, ours is an overnight initiative, with formal training being improvised along the way. Gups, mangmis, other Gewog Tshogdu (Block Committee)/Dzongkhag Tshogde (District Council) members, clerks, accountants, and administrative officers in gewogs, and the dzongkhag administrators need new skills and knowledge, management systems and styles, processes, benchmarking, communications, organisational culture, motivation, equipment, and resources.

Our decentralisation is yet to mature and there are many challenges.

Just as the elected officials are close to the people, they are also vulnerable to influences themselves. They are straddling a triangle of politicians, civil servants, and the people.

The politicians will push party interests and make promises that are sometimes beyond the government-approved Plans. This is evident in the vehement view of one gup that the gewog-level political branches did more harm than good. Being apolitical could be relegated to a mere theory in our new political system, given the personalised relationships within Bhutanese society.

Sometimes bureaucrats are not much easier to deal with, because they consider themselves better qualified and as being “above” local officials. Local leaders and the people are made to manoeuvre through the bureaucratic maze and work can be delayed for long periods. The tensions between elected leaders and gewog administrative officers are yet to be cleared.

Gups are also constantly negotiating with the people – voters – who are getting more demanding, having more access to political leaders. As one gup ruefully puts it, there is nobody who has no needs and everyone expects their own priorities to be attended to.

Incentives enjoyed by the local leaders include the Gewog Development Grant and Boleros. It is also a reality that, as much as the facilities are better than ever before, the risks are greater. His Majesty The King therefore emphasised the importance of the rule of law and the need for local leaders to be acutely conscious of the risks of corruption and fraud.

For women, the trials are greater. “The people don’t trust us,” said one of the two women who were elected. Voters are used to male leaders like village headmen and mang-aps. Interestingly, she was elected on her campaign promise that she would do something about the growing number of listless youth in the countryside. That’s one herculean task.

As implementers, gups need to contribute to as well as understand and follow the development Plans. As decision makers with more and more funds, they need to prioritise local issues and allocate funds where it is critical. But in today’s scenario, they can also reduce divides and bring people together. They are the real bridge between the politicians, civil servants, and the people. His Majesty The King reminded the gups of their larger responsibility on the path of nation-building, keeping in mind the most important national priorities: Security and sovereignty of Bhutan, peace, harmony and unity of the people, and our customs and traditions.

It is not in vain that our legislation procedures are still going through a painful process. The Gewog Yargye Tshogchung and Dzongkhag Yargye Tshogdu *chathrim*s (acts) have been drafted, enacted, modified and refined since 2003. As *throms* (towns) emerged and grew in urbanising Bhutan, their local

governance became pertinent, and a separate *chathrim* was developed and later consolidated with the legislation guiding DTs and GTs. Legislation has been passed and retracted. New contradictions have emerged with every debate. The Election Commission of Bhutan has had differences with parliament and the government. In fact, the Act needed a royal assent to be passed.

Bhutan's democracy is maturing under the benevolent eye of the Monarch. And, on October 12, 2016, His Majesty The King reminded the gups, as well as the Bhutanese population, that local government is not the lowest level of government, as it is sometimes misconceived. On the contrary, it is the most important level of government, because local leaders are the nearest and closest level of government to the people. Local governments are indispensable avenues for participation in democracy and development. In the long run, the success of democracy in Bhutan will be determined by the success of local governments.