

National Interest Versus Party Interest: What Former Chimis Think of Parliamentary Discussions

Tashi Dema

Norzang, after returning from Thimphu, tells the farmers in his remote village that members of ruling and opposition parties “argue like a married couple” during the live broadcast of National Assembly (NA) sessions.

The villagers, who do not have television to watch the deliberations and news, say that since the Members of Parliament have university degrees, they should not be arguing with each other, but should be deliberating issues of national interest.

Norzang says he doubts that elected members think of national interest.

This is an excerpt of an episode from a series broadcast on the Bhutan Broadcasting Service every night after the 9 pm news. The significance is that many Bhutanese citizens echo this view when they talk about deliberations in the National Assembly.

A Trashigang resident, Sonam Dorji, 53, who served as the Trashigang town chimi (representative), said that when they were representatives of the people then, they were too timid even to look at officials directly in the eyes.

Although the Parliament of Bhutan comprises the Druk Gyalpo, the National Council, and the National Assembly,¹ people pay more attention to National Assembly deliberations during Parliament sessions. “The MPs, being university graduates, should be more refined and argue with less ego,” he said. “They need to respect each other in the Supreme House.”

A former chimi, Namgay Phuntsho of Punakha, said that when they were chimis, they represented the people’s views by bringing in the agenda from the people, and it was not based on a political party manifesto.

He said that, unlike today, it was not the majority of MPs that decided the National Assembly resolutions, but the views of the general public.

1 http://www.nationalcouncil.bt/assets/uploads/docs/acts/2017/Constitution_of_Bhutan_2008.pdf

The 59-year-old man, who served as chimi for 18 years, said there was no voting and no show of hands system, which allowed the Speaker to decide on resolutions and laws in line with government policies.

Today, the resolutions are based on the “majority” — the ruling government and the Party in power, since it has more members.

The NA must represent the people of their constituency once they are elected, and not the Party they contested from.

An aspiring MP, Tenzin Lekphel, who contested from the first political party formed in the country (the People’s Democratic Party) and later helped formed the Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (popularly known as DNT in 2013), said that most NA resolutions appeared to be based on the ruling government’s need to show to people that they could implement their political manifestos.

Citing the example of the thromde (municipality) resolution of 2016², he said that he knew some ruling MPs had reservations about the establishment of the dzongkhag (district) and yenlag thromdes (satellite town), but they unanimously voted for their establishment anyway. “If not for the Supreme Court writ³, Bhutan would have incurred a huge loss in instituting dzongkhag and yenlag thromdes.”

Media reports state that the government, while amending the Local Government (LG) Act in 2014, made it mandatory to institute a dzongkhag and yenlag thromde in every dzongkhag. “The previous provisions of criteria specifying the size and number of voters in a demkhong (constituency) were also done away with. The government also pledged to establish a thromde in each dzongkhag. One observer said that the government could not push to fulfil their pledges at the cost of the State, and that, too, in violation of the Constitution,” a Kuensel report stated.

Tenzin Lekphel said that the Speaker had a big role to play to ensure that the deliberations and resolutions of the NA are in line with national interest. “The Speaker should be neutral but, in our case, the Speaker is also from the ruling party.”

He said that while we seemed to replicate the democratic practices of neighbouring countries, we should be different, as Bhutan is a small country with an intricate society.

2 <http://www.kuenselonline.com/15-dzongkhags-cleared-for-thromde-election/>

3 <http://www.kuenselonline.com/sc-issues-writ-deferring-thromde-elections/>

“We need not necessarily imitate the Parliament sessions of neighbouring countries, where the MPs not only argue, but physically assault each other in Parliament.”

It is not only people outside the Parliament who feel that the NA deliberations and resolutions should focus on national interest.

A serving MP, who chose to be anonymous, said there were occasions when he contradicted his own principles and convictions.

He said that he was often advised to align with his Party while voicing his concerns in the NA. “There are incidences where your stand can be against the Party’s or a Minister’s stand.” He said that they could choose to be different and speak against the Party, but they would face the consequences of being sidelined. “They call you the black sheep and do not share Party discussions and decisions with you.”

A former MP, Lhatu of Trashigang, while declaring his candidature to contest in the National Council (NC) elections, said that the NC was different, as it was based on personal ideologies and not Party orientation.

“When it comes to Parties, it is difficult, as you have to even lie sometimes, which is not always in line with your conscience⁴.”

A member of the present ruling government, Bumthang’s Chumey-Ura MP Tshewang Jurme, who previously served in the National Council, said that going by the book, it was designed in such a way that the government had the upper hand, so that no budget was stopped, to enable the smooth functioning of the government.

The book also mandates that the deliberations are of national interest and not Party interest. “The National Assembly should function as per the NA rules of procedure where an MP functions as a part of the NA and not as a member of the Party.”

He says that is the reason it is called the “Supremacy of the NA”, to which every member defers. Tshewang Jurme said that there was a collective functioning of the members, which is why committees were formed, and it functioned on a daily basis. “The stand of a particular member should be as per the stand of the committee, and not as member of the ruling Party or Opposition.”

4 <http://www.kuenselonline.com/former-dpt-mp-to-contest-for-trashigang-nc/>

He said that in reality, however, committee decisions could be shelved, and some members defied the committee's stand.

Such perceptions of Parliamentary deliberations also seem to have caused fear among the people, that there is a "us versus them" syndrome⁵ among NA members.

A Thimphu resident, Gyeltshen, 75, said it appeared that some MPs took part in the deliberations just to show solidarity. "There is so much need for members to stop unnecessary bickering and to come together to discuss issues that affect the people and country," he said.

Citing the examples of unemployment and hydropower issues, he said the members had to seek solutions instead of bickering over how the situation was during the time of the past government. "It's time our leaders, instead of dividing themselves along Party lines, resolve the issues."

He said that it could be because our National Assembly members were from two Parties. "Sometimes I wonder if a multi-party system could have avoided such confrontations in Parliament."

A serving MP, who did not want to be named, said while there were no blatant incidents, the "us versus them" syndrome was evident, because some leaders casually remarked that a certain constituency did not deserve the appropriate budget since the MP was from the opposition Party.

"This has been the case since 2008 and nothing has changed," he said.

The MP explained that members were either referred to as PDP or DPT MPs, making it difficult for reconciliation after the elections. "Ideally you should represent your constituency and that is why the Speaker, when referring to MPs, call them by their constituency names," he said. "But when it comes to the stand a member takes it is mostly in line with Party interest and not as a member of the House."

The question is how can we have a better system, with members who represent the people's views more than Party politics?

There are instances where members do not necessarily follow the Party interest to question Ministers and the government on certain issues.

⁵ <http://www.theemotionmachine.com/the-us-vs-them-mentality-how-group-thinking-can-irrationally-divide-us/>

The Gasa MP, Pema Drukpa, asked if Ministers could keep their duty Prado, in a question-and-answer session of the NA. While the Finance Minister said they would decide when their term was over the Prime Minister had to retract this answer, and said they would surrender it to the State. While rumours were rife that other members were angry with the MP for asking the question it was an example of a Parliamentary member not being in line with Party members.

The former Chief Justice of Bhutan, Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye, in his book, “The Constitution of Bhutan: Principles and Philosophies”, stated that Parliament was a body representing different political opinions in the country wherein all legislative powers were vested.

The book describes Parliament as “a deliberative body where policies and the welfare and development issues of the people and the nation are discussed”.

The first National Assembly, held in Punakha in 1953, had 138 members comprising members of the central government, district administration, monk body, and representatives of the people⁶. The members were then called *thuemis* (elected representatives) or *chimis* (local government representatives).

Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye said there was a separation of power even during the time of *chimis* since the elected *chimis* could oppose the government or executive body.

“The Ministers were nominated by His Majesty The King and elected by Parliament and they played the role of the executive. The NA was legislative and the *chimis* played the role of an opposition.”

The former Chief Justice, in his book, also stated that educated Parliamentarians had the imperative duty to provide the nation with enlightened laws. “Parliament is meant to be a citadel of justice and the embodiment of crystallised wisdom and leadership. The Parliament of Bhutan is the representative of the people of Bhutan, and its members should think of the national good.”

He added that Speakers had played a vital role over the last few decades, particularly after the devolution of power by His Majesty The Fourth Druk Gyalpo. “Under the devolution of power, His Majesty had enunciated a unique system of governance, where the Ministers were elected after they were nominated by His Majesty.”

6 Gyambo S and Dorji T, *Drukyl Decides*

He said that in a democratic system, the Speaker was always from the ruling party for governance, and not as an opponent. “Opposition and opponents are two different things. To oppose everything the government is doing, there will be a chaotic system where there will be no governance.”

Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye said that it was a democratic norm to have the Speaker from a ruling Party to represent and control the majority in Parliament. “Under a functioning democracy the Speaker cannot be from the other Party.”

However, once the member is chosen as the Speaker, it is a Parliamentary norm for the Speaker to be impartial and fair.

Some people question why Bhutan did not opt to have a democracy without political Parties. The former Chief Justice said that in such a system, it is the powerful and influential who ruled the others.

“There is no organised platform or organisation to oppose the authoritarian and dictatorship. A Party platform can provide that. As bad as a Party system may be, it is a coherent alternative, and it provides a platform for unity, and not individualism. The Party gives the public a voice.”

Without the Party, it is the personality and the standing of a person that prevails, and not ideology and principle. “A person can change his principle and ideology, but where there is an organised Party, they have to stick to the certain principle and ideology on the grounds that the people endorsed them.”

On why Bhutan did not opt for a multi-party system, Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye said multi-party sounded nice, because it implied plurality and represented diverse views but, under that principle, certain national interests and security of the nation were sacrificed. “Under the principle of the multi-party system, regionalism, ethnicity, group mentality, and extremism are promoted.”

He said that, while drafting the Constitution, it was found that a multi-party system in the region was problematic. There was a time when there were 14 Parties in one government in India, 60 Parties in Nepal, and about 80 Parties in Indonesia. Wherever there were too many Parties governance was also sacrificed. “To Bhutan governance was important and necessary for progress, peace, sovereignty, and stability.”

He said people asked why there could not be a three-party system and it was because there was a danger of promoting regionalism. “The third Party will also play an important role in trying to topple and to bully the government.

Two-party is a plurality so that there is security and stability in the country with a strong Opposition.”

Conclusion

Our Parliamentarians must set standards and abide by the rules of procedure, and bear in mind the Royal Kasho (Royal Decree) signed by His Majesty The Fourth King on December 9, 2006, which states:

“As I hand over my responsibilities to my son, I repose my full faith and belief in the people of Bhutan to look after the future of our nation, for it is the Bhutanese people who are the true custodians of our tradition and culture, and ultimate guardians of the security, sovereignty, and continued well-being of our country (Kuensel).”