

A Chasm Between Vision and Policy

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Decisions have shaped human history, established the current global scenarios, and will influence the future of mankind. Decisions have created the world's systems of government, as well as the legal, economic and social order. As a country and as a society, we have reached where we have reached because of the decisions made by our ancestors. And the decisions we make today will decide where our children will be tomorrow.

It is no surprise that the art of decision-making has become an academic subject in its own right. Modern decision theory has developed since the middle of the 20th century with contributions from several academic disciplines. But, further back, social scientists quote the philosopher, Condorcet (1743-1794), who prescribed one theory on the phases of decision-making.

To explain a greatly simplified version of that theory, Condorcet divided the decision-making process into three stages. One examines the various aspects of the issue and gathers different opinions. Then the issue is discussed and different opinions melded into a number of choices. Once the decision is reduced to a choice between a manageable set of alternatives, the third stage is to make the actual choice between these alternatives (Condorcet, [1793] 1847).

This article does not delve into the rationale of the theories and processes of decision-making, as fascinating as that undoubtedly is. It is a relatively cursory look at the procedures and processes of designing and deciding national policies in Bhutan. It will discuss what may be missing in our decision-making process, in the context of a modernising Bhutan.

Public policy is described as the principled guide to action or inaction taken by the executive branch of the state. It must solve problems efficiently and effectively, serve justice, support governmental institutions, and encourage active citizenship. Therefore, public policies must be based on very clear objectives. Implementing a policy successfully means achieving the objectives.

In essence, my premise is that good policy decisions cannot be separated from competent policy analysis which is a serious business in the realm of social sciences. I argue that good decisions take time and effort. In basic terms, it means that decisions should be made after serious forethought, afterthought, and reflection on their consequences.

Before Monarchy

Historian John Ardussi's research (only monastic sources being available) reveals that Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel made key decisions in consultation with either his own father (either in person or in meditative vision following his death), or in meditative communion with the famous Rangjoen Kharsapani image (the magical cremains from a vertebra of the famous Drukpa founder Tsangpa Gyare, possession of which became the *casus belli* in the wars with Tibet).

The decision to leave Tibet for Bhutan was said to have resulted from a vision with the deity Mahakala. The decision in 1625 to found a new state in Bhutan resulted from meditative visions during his famous three-year retreat at Tango with his deceased father Tenpei Nyima, and again with the revered Kharsapani image representing the Drukpa founder Tsangpa Gyare.

Ardussi notes that consultations on secular matters are rarely mentioned in the texts, but were probably made with his long-time student Tenzin Drukgye, the first *Desi*, who had taken monastic vows up to the intermediate level (*Getsbul*) and served the Zhabdrung in a civil administrative capacity even at Ralung monastery.

It is noteworthy that, after the Zhabdrung went into his final retreat (1651), and thereafter until his reincarnate successors appeared on the scene fifty years later, the administrative situation was very ad hoc. But the process of consulting spiritual advisors continued. For example, Gongsar Jigme Namgyel was known to consult his *Lama*, Jangchhub Tsuendrel, on important matters.

So in the days before information—including numbers and statistics—became important, the basis of most decisions was spiritual faith, experience, and sometimes a gamble. Decision-making was the ruler's mandate and therefore a political process. Decision makers used intuition and instinct but also resorted to strategies and tactics that are not all unfamiliar in today's culture of governance.

Monarchy

The Kings of Bhutan, known for having steered Bhutan for 110 years through enlightened vision and policies, used a number of strategies to decide on broad policy objectives. They sought the blessings of spiritual guardians, established the tradition of consulting credible personalities, known as *kadroeps*, and institutionlised formal bodies including the National Assembly, the Royal Advisory Council, and a disciplined and increasingly professional bureaucracy.

Today we have the judiciary, legislative, and executive arms of government influenced by the Westminster model of democracy. The parliament and cabinet are the sources of collective decisions that are conveyed and executed through the administrative process both at the national and local levels.

The policies of the First and Second Kings were aimed at consolidating sovereignty, strengthening national security, developing international relations, and introducing education systems. While their approach to decision-making has not been documented in any detail, the results of their vision and policy decisions are clear evidence of their wisdom.

The caution and skill with which they maneuvered relations with the British in India and the authorities of Tibet and China became inherent characteristics of the Bhutanese leadership. They were firmly ensconced in Bhutan's isolation yet showed long-term foresight with a global perspective. Ardussi sums up the basis of their policy decisions: "Over the centuries Bhutan's leaders have learnt from their core traditions, from their neighbours and, in Buddhist fashion, they have learnt from their adversaries."

The Third Druk Gyalpo His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck's vision was revolutionary, with policies aimed at modernising the country. He introduced comprehensive reforms covering the legislative, social, economic and political realms. In fact His Majesty the Third Druk Gyalpo's enthusiasm for reforms was acclaimed with a caution by the Indian Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi:

Your Majesty, who could know more about the nuances of such a change than you. We always support democracy, but it has to be gradual, for the sake of Bhutan's safety, especially in keeping with its emerging new personality.

A master of change management, His Majesty was known to consult Bhutanese elders and a large number of Indian leaders and officials. His Majesty was known to even

instigate rumours to gauge public reaction to ideas that could be drafted into policies. This strategy is not very different from the stories that present governments around the world float in the media to gauge public reaction. We lack written discourse on the topic but the community around the Palace believed that His Majesty sometimes planted questions among Assembly members and other citizens who questioned the credentials of prominent government leaders and raised important issues.

The Five-Year Plans, introduced in 1961, are a series of national economic development plans adopted by the government of Bhutan. The World Bank's 1989 appraisal noted the sense of caution in moving economic development forward:

Coming late to the development scene, Bhutan was eager to avoid mistakes committed elsewhere. Although strongly dependent on foreign aid, it was determined to follow its own set of priorities, keep public finance on an even keel, build up a well trained but lean bureaucracy, and prevent environmental damage from overexploitation of the forests or uncontrolled growth of tourism.

His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo's vision of Gross National Happiness, as interpreted by scholars, encompasses economic self-reliance, preservation of Bhutan's rich culture and pristine environment, and good governance. His Majesty built and professionalised the Bhutanese government and civil service through well-designed statecraft. One of the more important policies was the human resource development with the Royal Charter of the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC) in 1982, marking the beginning of a coordinated approach in addressing human resource management. A United Nations (UN) representative once said that His Majesty was so conversant with international development strategies that he could easily be a top consultant for the UN.

Retired Chief Justice Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye remembers witnessing His Majesty unfold his vision for the future of Bhutan after discussions with senior officials such as the late Dasho Lam Penjore (then Deputy Minister for Planning), Mr. Yogesh Chandra (a senior Indian government officer appointed as Development Advisor to Bhutan), and numerous other Bhutanese officials and foreign visitors. His Majesty was known to have long discussions with the resident and visiting ambassadors.

Reporting for Kuensel for more than three decades, I spoke to or interviewed nearly every visitor who received an audience with His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo. I did not meet anyone who was not amazed by His Majesty's grasp of local, national, and global issues. Every international journalist came out of long audiences feeling thoroughly "interviewed".

The Present

While past rulers crafted their own systems of seeking ideas and views, today's leadership is now more conscious of the increasingly interactive society and community. Thus the generally recommended modern-day decision-making processes that, in essence, call for wider consultation and contributions. Policy makers are expected to make sound and rational decisions on the assumption that they can assess options. Bhutan's own information policies and thinking assumes that this is all the more possible today because of the technology available to help managers make good choices.

Having separated the state and government through a unique Royal move we have established a number of institutions that include parliament, the cabinet, executive bodies including the planning commission. But what are the decision-making processes that we have adopted? And what is missing? To provide a context, let us look at modernity from the beginning of the democratisation process, after the formal separation of government authority into the three branches.

Today, Bhutan's vision is unfolding in the Royal speeches of His Majesty the King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, speeches that reflect a culmination of the institutional memory of the Royal lineage and a new foresight for the future. Starting with the historic National Day speech in 2006, His Majesty has outlined the higher goals for Bhutan and Bhutanese society through inspiring speeches and informal discussions with the people.

But the unfolding Royal vision is yet to be translated into coherent policies by Bhutanese planning specialists. Through what policies can we ensure the "security and sovereignty of our nation, our unity and harmony, and sense of peace and happiness"? How do we create the "just, equal, and harmonious society" that Gross National Happiness means? What kind of education, or learning, will give us the "higher standards" and "excellence", and "empower the people to achieve their full potential" to ensure that "what we lack in numbers, we must make up in talent"?

We have a gap between data collection and data analysis, and again between data analysis and policy. There are gaps between existing public policies and the implementation of the policies. The most visible gap, arguably, is the absence of wider input into policy-making including the strategy and tactics of policy-making. And the professionalism of civil servants remains largely untapped because of a lack of trust and perhaps the lack of knowledge on how to manage professionalism.

We have yet to develop the mindset for long-term, fact-based strategic policy

analysis. The Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) meets erratically to discuss ministerial policy presentations that are not read by most members. Which means that currently there is no principled analysis of policy issues.

Without an adequate understanding of the science of policy analysis, I take a pragmatic approach and look at how policies are made elsewhere.

Most governments encourage intellectual input from think tanks, both publicly funded and private, research done by academic institutions, and feedback from independent thinkers, whether they are columnists, bloggers, or general news analysts and commentators. Conventional media and academic journals are also a valuable source of information for policy making. This is already a mature culture of discourse in many countries.

The strategy is to get as many views and ideas as possible on all aspects of a policy. This would mean organised and open discourse on the issues related to any proposed policy options through public polls and other policy-making exercises. Today, the versatility of technology enables people to express their views and reactions to events and ideas. The social media carry views and comments that are often superficial but sometimes very perceptive and wide-ranging. The idea is to accommodate debate and assess differing viewpoints to gain better depth of understanding.

The Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS) was intended to be, among other things, a think tank that would advise government on policy issues. But, while its work on the GNH industry is gaining momentum, CBS and the government's GNH Commission have very limited interaction. The Royal Institute of Management was established to provide input into government thinking and policy but this has been limited to sporadic efforts to discuss and influence public administration.

In the present situation, the National Council seems to be taking several initiatives to widen the scale of political discourse, looking at socio-economic and political issues. Opposition members are beginning to challenge government decisions more aggressively with each session.

Our politicians and officials have to come to grips with the widening process of democratic discourse, and especially appreciate the benefits of wider consultation with stakeholders. Transparent discourse will help maximise our leverage with our neighbours and development partners and also relieve the pressures of what are perceived as sensitive decisions. Domestic and foreign policies must definitively serve Bhutan's own long-term interests, but those interests need to be clearly understood

in the contemporary context of competing policy pressures including the interest of our neighbours. In the absence of policy guidelines some of our officials tend to make decisions that are closer to paranoia than real sensitivity.

Does Bhutan learn from other places? Bhutanese officials do travel quite extensively, on study tours and for seminars, workshops, and conferences. But many officials still have a “maintenance of status quo” mindset and do not aim to create change, a mindset that is vital for important decisions. Seminars and workshops have their value but we need something more structured, designed to have a continuing effect on policy. A formal review of change management should be an essential and regular part of senior officials’ professional training.

Politics, particularly democratic politics, aiming to stimulate discussion and generate a diversity of views, should offer an advantage in decision-making. But these very differences can be a stumbling block. When party leaders feel a need to differ from other parties for the sake of being different, it can result in erratic policy changes that slow down rather than streamline growth.

The political party system, minus political ideology, encourages individualism, to the detriment of consensus seeking and development of the mind-frame allowing political accommodation. Politics becomes a struggle of egos, precluding compromise. A conscious understanding of the techniques of—and benefits from—“principled political compromise” would enable both greater public contribution to policy, and greater public acceptance of policy when it is decided.

Politicians are often wary of alternative sources of power and this reinforces existing and deep-rooted tendencies to centralise authority in the hands of a few. How many decisions are being made by the decentralised authorities such as the *Dzongkhag Yargye Tshogdu* (DYT) and *Gewog Yargye Tshogdu* (GYT) and *Thromdes*? Perhaps educational and institutional strengthening of a “consensus” local level of politics might overcome the individualistic stamp of party politics.

Wise policy decisions require an apolitical but result-focused professionalism that will enhance the political strength and influence of an otherwise small and resource-poor government. A politicised civil service, for example, with officials depending on the patronage of politicians, could quickly pave the way to a compromised independence and sovereignty. Similarly the Election Commission, Anti Corruption Commission, Royal Audit Authority and other Constitutional bodies need to function with autonomy from political interference.

The parliamentary form of representative democracy is new to Bhutan. While much of the Constitution is novel to Bhutan, gathered from practice elsewhere, and crafted to suit a vision for a Bhutanese whole, we can see both benefits and evolving problems with the institutions and their effectiveness of operation and hoped-for balance.

More versatility of roles within the Bhutanese political and social systems will help, especially given our small populace with an even smaller talent pool. In most countries, particularly in the so-called developed countries, there is a healthy interchange among citizens in the service of the nation. For example, the government of a country may call on a university professor specialising in Chinese studies to advise the foreign ministry or serve as ambassador to China, or send an accomplished Economist to WTO, or a successful entrepreneur to ILO.

Some governments recruit people just to think.

Then Action

A policy decision implies the end of deliberation and the beginning of action. A good decision does not guarantee a good outcome or effective implementation which is even more important. We have, perhaps, a wider gap between policy and implementation. As His Majesty the King himself has repeatedly pointed out, our government shows a tendency to lack initiative and follow-through action as much as our society shows “dependence” on the initiatives or *kidu* of the Monarch.

That is why there is an urgent need to strengthen core values in a professional and apolitical civil service, to reaffirm that the civil service is an instrument of government and not of party-politics. It is the constitutional duty of civil servants to serve a duly elected government and not the political parties or their politicians. The RCSC should reassess and reaffirm its role in overseeing such a civil service and politicians should publicly support the autonomy of the RCSC.

For good policies to be well drafted and effectively implemented, there is a need for much greater coordination within the government, starting, perhaps, with the Cabinet and the bureaucracy. The clarity of the roles of the Bhutanese politician and civil servant will be a good place to start. The bureaucracy provides professional input into national policies and is also the implementer of the final decisions made by the Executive. The Executive carries the trust of the people.

The bottom line is that implementing a good vision requires hard work.