

# Experiencing Democracy: A Personal Reflection

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National discourse in Bhutan has described democracy as a gift from the Throne. This paper draws on personal views and experiences to trace the reasons for the theory and argues that democracy in Bhutan is, in essence, a responsibility of the Bhutanese people.

The seed of Bhutanese democracy was already in the ground since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first major reform that Bhutan's third King, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, introduced soon after ascending the Golden Throne was to establish the National Assembly to involve the people in the decision-making processes for governance. On more than one occasion, it was the King who insisted that the National Assembly should exercise the vote of confidence against the Monarch. In education, the modern school system, based on a western model, had already been started to align Bhutan's future with the way of the world.

Since the early 1980s, the fourth Druk Gyalpo, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, had stressed the need for capacity building of local leaders across the country as a part of the policy of decentralisation. National development plans were not designed in ivory towers but based on proposals from local assemblies called dzongkhag tshogdu.

In 1968, His Majesty entrusted the National Assembly to choose members of the Cabinet and then handed over the power of governance to the ministers, adding yet another flavour to the process. This was followed by the drafting of the Constitution four years later by representatives of different sections of the society. These significant reforms culminated in the Democratic Constitutional Monarchy, with an elected parliament as one of the three arms of the government.

## Democratic Dialogues

Parliament has since been dealing with contentious issues for which they often had to defer their decisions, as is normal everywhere. Parliamentary

committees working on specific issues spend hours debating, questioning, and reasoning among the members until everyone is more or less in consensus on an issue.

Interaction with concerned stakeholders is also a part of the committees' tasks. The debates that come to public view are only a third of what actually happens behind the scene. Yet, as we often notice, the debates in Parliament are sometimes inconclusive.

My own experience, in retrospect, was that the National Council's arguments were generally branded as opposing those of the NA. On a broader perspective, the NC as a House of Review, is mandated to review parliamentary decisions so they are rationally acceptable and beneficial to the society. It had even delayed Bills that would have a far reaching impact if passed under pressure. I have a lot of admiration for my fellow members in both Houses who made tremendous efforts to make the first democratically elected Parliament worth the efforts and expectations of His Majesty the King, the fourth Druk Gyalpo, and of the general public.

## **Ideologies**

Ideologies are believed to form the operating principles a political party may adopt to run a government. Ideologies define the political parties aspiring to be at the helm of government affairs for a period of time. With Gross National Happiness as the overall goal for all socio-economic development, the Bhutanese general public are yet to hear about the kind of scenario Bhutan should achieve in about 20 to 40 years from today, in terms of accomplishment in social, economic, political, cultural and environmental aspects.

What kind of guiding principles would a party adopt to get to their goals over their five-year term in office and beyond? One often wonders how far a political party is prepared to journey into the future, with their idiosyncratic and populist offer of short-term lures. Have the manifestations and arguments during the pre-election debates been built on an ideology?

We have witnessed the sanctioning of extra grants to local governments over and above the usual budget provisions that were already beyond the local capacity to manage. Should we not look at how to bring the children

of rural villages and humble families into the mainstream education system, instead of creating central schools where complete boarding facilities (including complete sets of personal essentials) are provided, at a time when most parents have the ability to support their children's education? What have we gained from the waiving of taxes and easing the electricity costs for domestic consumption, and issuing vehicle import licences to every family?

## **Society Behaviour and Responses**

The voter turnout on polling day is still far from a satisfactory level but, compared with the general opinions of people during the initial few years, some maturity in participation can be observed at local meetings. While our overall loyalty and dedication to the Wangchuck dynasty remain as strong as ever, we also respect the laws passed by our lawmakers.

At the same time, we can also interact with our representatives in case of some uncomfortable elements in their decisions and other grievances. We know that the guidance and support from our benevolent King have always been for the benefit of the people. We know fully well that, in the event the elected parliament fails in its functions, His Majesty would be there as an ultimate support for common citizens.

There is no such thing as perfect social behaviour and perfect harmony with all the goodies ornamenting our lives, but an improvement in small ways, consistently adjusting with the change of time as we transit from one government to another, with continued guidance from our leadership, will ensure that peace and happiness prevail in all walks of life.

## **Democratic Values**

Democracy was not introduced in Bhutan for the sake of change in governance. The efficiency and fairness with which the pre-democracy government delivered development programmes were already remarkable. Democratic values such as fairness in decision making, freedom of speech, equality before the law, social justice, and pursuit of happiness were enjoyed under the reign of our Kings.

If the people had expected an increased efficiency in service delivery, this aspect has yet to be proven. There are stories across the country where

farmers meet with an empty chair or are told to “come back tomorrow”, or someone “lost the file”, “document is incomplete”, and “I am busy”. How would anybody feel if, despite closely following up on an application and taking it personally to the next higher level of office, he or she is told that his or her document is short of one thing or another? When returning the paper to the initial office, there is not even an expression of embarrassment on the person’s face, let alone an apology.

His Majesty the King has been repeatedly indicating the lack of quality in service delivery. The lack of temper (*ngar*) pronounced in the last National Day Royal address says it all. Opinions from some officials indicate that honesty, commitment and fairness are futile. It looks like the democratic system is over-burdening a small number of sincere and hardworking civil servants, while the rest continue to embrace the deluded view that their non-actions will go unnoticed.

## **Role of Media**

Media and elected members work with and for each other. Members need voices to inform the public, especially the constituency, for legitimate continuity in their trust, while the media need authoritative sources for the information they produce. Quick responses to media inquiries and interviews may help develop a good rapport. On the other hand, delaying such responses may lead to speculation and suspicion of information being hidden, which do not benefit both sides. The public needs to know the truth.

Preparedness is necessary. A good decision not made in time may become a bad decision. Someone who is accessible, friendly, realistic, concise, courteous, proactive, accurate, and careful may be able to maintain a clear forward path. Issues that hit the news are controversial, conflicting, and time bound, while officials are newsworthy. That is why they are sought by the media, so reporters can communicate news faster to the public and constituencies.

Building and maintaining relationships between politicians and media is therefore an important component of public service. Conveying the correct information is a responsibility of reporters, while those who hold the information bear the other responsibility.

## **Civil Society**

Elected governments have the mandate to fulfill their promises and a multiple of requirements, along with planned programmes within a period of time. Civil society helps meet these requirements. It is mainly because Civil Society Organisations (CSO) are less bogged down with bureaucratic procedures, which consume time and energy, the constituencies can receive the benefits quicker and with better impact. Parliament in Bhutan has yet to come to terms with the services of CSO.

For example, the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy (BCMD) is vigorously pursuing its vision of an informed and engaged society that actively participates in the democratic processes. Towards this vision, they have been training youth to interact with the communities, mapping local issues that need common actions, and educating youth and teachers on democratic values.

BCMD received recognition from His Majesty the King for its socially and democratically useful efforts. Parliament and government, in their term of office, could benefit from such CSOs. They are presently active with their services to the society at large with minimum input from local resources. I guess we have to wait until some courageous and bold elements appear to develop an ideal working relationship with the CSOs.

## **Conclusion**

The ultimate outcome of all our efforts, be it the Parliament, the Judiciary or the Executive, and the active support from civil society and the players in these organisations, is to benefit the people at present and the generations that follow.

Our democracy ought to take a path that is informed by the phenomena of impermanence and the six perfections, which encourages a reasonable generosity in everyone, giving and working for everybody's wellbeing. If we work for the satisfaction of others we have perfected our generosity. If we have sacrificed some personal comforts to be punctual, we have perfected the aspect of discipline. Likewise, contemplating and responding to criticism is perfecting the art of patience and concentration together and focusing on the assigned duties with pure heart gives us perfection in

diligence. The mental factor that is able to discriminate between what is correct and what is harmful is already a superior knowledge, and we have perfected the wisdom.

Therefore, democracy is the responsibility to manage our own affairs with the vigour and efficiency that give us peace, prosperity, and happiness in the long run.