

# Worrying Trends in Bhutan's Democracy

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When I first heard of the talk of establishing parliamentary democracy in Bhutan, it was in early 2006. I was working with the United Nations Peacekeeping Mission in war-torn Afghanistan, where democracy had failed to bring peace. I had moved straight from Europe, where democracy is successful, after having studied and lived there for more than a decade.

On my visit to Bhutan in late 2006, an uncle asked me what I thought about democracy in Bhutan. I said that we may be around 30 years too early for it; not in its virtue and success, but in the readiness of the electorates in actually understanding the true essence of democracy and their own roles and responsibilities, as well as the ills of democracy. I feel it is not only the successful elections that determine the success of democracy, but the achieving of the ultimate aspirations of His Majesty and the people of Bhutan through collective efforts. Democracy is only a means to an end.

Democracy, in all intent, has been considered the best choice for people, whereby people establish a government of the people, for the people, and by the people, through free and fair elections. However, democracy has also been criticised as a means for politicians to use votes to get into power, only to impose their unfair rules on the people.

With its virtues, democracy also comes with vices, which the people must determine through solemn and educated participation. In the wrong hands, it can even become the cause for the derailment of existing peace and the start of endless wars.

Unlike in most countries with histories of struggle for democracy, where people have fought and died and sometimes imposed with wars, for Bhutan, it was simply handed down by the abdication of the Throne by His Majesty the fourth Druk Gyalpo at his own will. People pleaded that His Majesty reconsider his decision and reinstate monarchy. Even to this day, people still insist that we revert to monarchy.

As people began to reluctantly accept it as a gift from the Golden Throne, my understanding was that behind such a noble decision by our farsighted monarch was a desire to share knowledge and responsibilities to make our people more capable. Although we have successfully elected three governments so far, the responsibilities remain unchanged for His Majesty who continues to travel on foot across harsh terrains to provide relief and comfort to people of far-flung villages; a responsibility entrusted to elected representatives.

All decisions before democracy were made by His Majesty, pertaining to the development and wellbeing of the people and our nation, resulting in huge responsibilities on a single individual - His Majesty himself. It did not seem fair that His Majesty worked ceaselessly and sowed the seeds single handedly with all the hardships, while we only reaped the fruits. It was time we all played our parts, and democracy was the way forward.

His Majesty the Druk Gyalpo said that our long-term goals were to enhance our security and sovereignty, promote our unique traditions and cultural heritage, conserve the environment, promote peaceful and harmonious coexistence with other nations, and enhance the reputation and national identity of our glorious nation, Palden Drukpa. These are the aspirations of His Majesty entrusted upon us to collectively realise, by electing governments based on national interests over self-interests, through our Constitutional rights and responsibilities. It is only due to the efforts of His Majesty that we remain on track and closer to achieving some of these goals. Bhutan was named as the first carbon-negative country in the world.

While we laud ourselves for three successful elections, we may still be far from realising the actual goals aspired to by His Majesty, and the sharing of His Majesty's burdens. We are into the third elected government and His Majesty is still in the forefront, not just by choice but by need, to spearhead developmental activities for our nation.

We have civil servants becoming complacent and our debts skyrocketing, the unemployment rates are in double digits and the economy near collapse, the emigration and brain drain are in large numbers and trust in our good governance is at the lowest. We have even forced His Majesty to dig into his personal savings for our rescue during the pandemic. Instead of sharing and lessening, we may have doubled the burden on His Majesty. How did we get here?

Since this was not the state before democracy, it is logical to put the blame on the politicians and political parties for this mess. Apart from the mock elections, with no parliamentary elections prior to 2008 to take precedence from, many electorates may have taken to the polls based on relationships, association, financial and other personal incentives as indoctrinated by politicians, instead of on their own educated assessments.

This could be blamed on the lack of proper guidance and capacity, because of the high illiteracy rate. But this was where the educated and literate aspiring politicians were entrusted with responsibilities to educate and guide them. Instead of seeing the innocence of the electorates as an opportunity, the politicians and political parties, in their determination to win the elections, may have used it to their advantage.

Likewise, in the absence of concrete ideologies separating the political parties, apart from the pledges and promises, it may have appeared inconsequential to the electorates who they voted into power. Some, fearing backlash, may have resorted to voting for their relatives and friends, while some did so under duress, and some were bribed. This has been evident from the past three elections, where some political party members and supporters were penalised by the Election Commission of Bhutan for the breach of the Election Act.

It was even more evident in my own personal experience as a political candidate for Bhutan Kuen-Nyam Party during the 2018 parliamentary elections. During my campaign, I encountered a senior citizen who asked me how I could favour him in financial terms, in return for his and his family members' votes. Taken aback, I asked him if he had ever considered the consequences of his action, and suggested that he based his decision on the capabilities of the politicians and political parties instead.

He said it did not matter to him who got elected; they were all the same. "The moment they are in power, they forget about us and talk about their own benefits," he said. He would still have to eat the same food, wear the same clothes, and face the same reality at his own expense, so he might as well benefit from these gifts now.

He said that the only tangible benefit he got so far from the past two elections was from selling his votes. It was very concerning and disheartening to hear

such words, especially from an elderly citizen who still seemed to have a say on the decisions of the rest of his family.

What will become of our future if such trends continue - and I am certain it will - with politicians and political parties becoming more power hungry and people more gullible? Decades down the line, what if our politicians and political parties are unable to match the financial values offered by external powers? For some, democracy may be a diplomatic way of taking over vulnerable nations, a possibility we cannot ignore in this ever-changing world.

*The views expressed are of my own and not that of my political party.*