

Political Parties and Ideology

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In many democracies around the world, ideology is important in politics, since it comprises beliefs, values, ideas, norms and guidelines that provide a coherent overall view of a political party's aspirations. They provide direction on what, when, where, why and how to achieve goals for the nation, which help the voter to identify with a party's thinking, and exercise his or her choice.

Ideology is formed when people with similar thinking and values group together, discuss and agree upon a particular viewpoint and structure it to make it stronger and codified, and finally propagate this idea into the masses to gain support. Every political party in every nation has its own ideology, some being capitalism, communism, liberalism and socialism, and these ideologies further shape the discourse and priorities of the party.

Political parties generally base their political action on an ideology which can be described as being left, right, or centre. Left refers to people with liberal views who support progressive reforms, such as greater social and economic equality. The far left is considered more extreme, with revolutionary views, such as communism and socialism.

The word right, in contrast, refers to people who have conservative views, who are disposed to preserving existing conditions, restoring traditional ones and limiting change. The far right is considered more extreme, including fascism and some oppressive ideologies.

Further, the centre right means moderate conservatives who are mostly pro-capitalism and support conservatism, while centre left means moderate liberals who support mixed economies and progressive taxation, with a stance for secularism and equality.

Political parties are normally motivated by different ideological goals that appeal to the electorate, with a manifesto containing policy proposals that are shaped by ideological values. It is common for democratic elections to feature competition between parties with different ideologies. Some

political parties follow a certain ideology very closely while others may take broad inspiration from a group of related ideologies without specifically embracing any one of them.

It is said that no political party can survive without an ideological commitment because an ideology gives the party's supporters a mission to strive for, and voters normally vote for the parties with which they identify, which have policies that represent the citizens' own interests best, or which are likely to change policies in their envisioned direction. Ideologies, therefore, help them decide their choice of candidates/party.

While Bhutan has witnessed much remarkable progress in terms of both democratic practices and good governance over the last few decades, the political transition since 2008 has exposed our nation to some unhealthy trends.

Given our new experience with democracy in Bhutan, political parties do not seem to identify themselves with a particular ideology even though they seem slightly aligned towards either left, right, or centre. Often, political parties present their ideology in a manner that is more of a vision, mission statement, or slogan, rather than ideology.

For example, the ideology of two of the oldest political parties read:

“Empowering people for liberty, equality and prosperity by devolving power and authority from the centre to the people” (People's Democratic Party or PDP);

“Establish a true and vibrant Political Party as an instrument for the creation of a united, prosperous and happy country defined by integrity and honour, where people have the right to exercise their freedom, leading to the fulfillment of their hopes and aspirations in the Democratic Constitutional Monarchy” (Druk Phuensum Tshogpa or DPT).

Another common practice in the political scenario is that political parties draw ideas from each other's manifesto and, closer to the elections, voters will find all political parties making similar pledges, promises, and policy stance. While Gross National Happiness (GNH) has been Bhutan's

development philosophy ever since it was promulgated by His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the Fourth King of Bhutan, in the 1970s each political party's interpretation and approach is different, further affecting continuity.

In the absence of ideological commitment by political parties, voters do not understand the policy stance of political parties and what to expect in terms of important national policies and vision for the country. Thus, voters end up exercising their choice based on trivial criteria: a candidate's persuasive and communication skills during the common forum and campaign; a candidate's personal characteristics; the community a candidate comes from; promises and pledges that directly benefit them; personal relations and association with candidates; and the party leaders' charisma.

Currently, in the absence of clear ideology, in order to woo the voters to win, candidates are normally seen playing with the sentiments of the people, by either trying to gain sympathy, making them feel moved with their personal stories, playing the regional/locality card, or making false promises and pledges. Candidates also echo pledges and promises made by their competitors, which further confuses the voters and, at times, engage in bribery and corruption. The lack of ideology is also creating personalised differences which divide the community.

Given this trend, there is already growing cynicism about politicians and politics. There are signs of voter apathy, political alienation, and political immaturity, decreasing involvement of the people in social and political participation, lack of effective political participation by women, and declining confidence and trust in elected leaders and government.

One way of addressing these challenges is ideological commitment by political parties. Many may believe the ideology of political parties is not effective in the elections, while others may believe it is not relevant for Bhutan. But, in democracy, identifying and communicating party ideology is important to enable voters to compare their own political stances with those of the parties, thereby exercising their choices. It will also help promote healthy democracy, as political parties provide more choice to the people in terms of beliefs, values, and ideas and how they intend to achieve their goals, which is the essence of democracy.

Clear ideology includes promotion of greater transparency, responsibility, and accountability to prevent wasting government time and resources, erroneous decisions by elected leaders, unfair trade practices, and victimisation of party supporters. We will also need to continue educating our population on the essence of democracy, thereby raising their political consciousness. This can help reduce the growing political cynicism and voter apathy, and enhance active political participation. Doing away with primary elections, and enforcing stricter rules with the resignation of elected leaders, could help prevent huge expenses at the elections.

Gender sensitisation and capacity building programmes could encourage higher political participation by women. More flexible interpretation of the electoral laws could address challenges related to political alienation, while strict monitoring and implementation of election rules can help prevent immoral practices, bribery, and political corruption during elections, and polarisation and fragmentation of society.

Lively parliamentary debate and vocal opposition should lead to better governance. More flexibility in civil service rules and electoral laws could also encourage competent aspiring politicians, thereby creating a pool of effective leaders with enhanced confidence by the people with longer-term objectives. The media can help promote greater understanding of ideology with objective and accurate reporting.

Besides electoral participation, people at every level of public life must become involved in the decisions that affect their lives. Policies are more likely to be stable and sustainable when they enjoy popular understanding and support. This requires some means for public consultation, to have input into governmental decisions, and some means of protesting policies and actions that do harm to the common interests.

Bhutan does not need standard ideologies found in other democracies, but we could build ideology based on our own values, revolved around fulfilling the basic requirements of the people, and in creating an enabling environment for people to pursue happiness, in line with our development philosophy of GNH.

The political parties cannot suddenly talk about the issues of climate change or ozone layer depletion, when people are struggling to have clean drinking water or a proper bridge over the river, or a reliable mobile network. To be candid, the idea of having free WiFi was so pleasing that the party formed a ruling government.

As the country develops, ideologies will also develop towards the higher realm of thought. It could be seen that political parties in different countries did not suddenly pull their ideologies from nowhere. They must have started their journey, like us, by fulfilling the basic requirements of the people.

We have just begun our journey and we will reach there too. Bhutan has always been guided by enlightened leaders. The journey would have been faster had the Monarchy continued, but then people would have never realised what it takes to rule the country. And people will remain ever conscious of the overall guidance provided by His Majesty The King.