

Elections in Bhutan: Facts and Reflections

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Prologue

Party based elections to the national parliament were held in Bhutan for the first time in 2008, when 252,812 of the 318,465 registered voters voted in the historic elections.¹ Two more elections to the parliament and three local government elections have been held since then.

While policy and rules related to Bhutan's elections and democracy are clearly enshrined in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan and the Election Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2008, the actual processes and experiences have been incremental. With the announcement of surprise names, people jumping lines to be president of political parties, and failed registration of new parties, the electorate has come a long way in understanding the nuances of elections and democracy.

Both facts and reflections have been used in this article. While facts and figures are based on published secondary sources, the narrative is reflective of personal and general experiences.

Parliament

With the introduction of Constitutional Monarchy in 2008, Bhutan has a bicameral parliament -- the Gyalong Tshokhang. The parliament consists of the Gyalong Tshogde (National Council), and the Gyalong Tshogdu (National Assembly). Elections to both houses are held every five years.

Based on the first-ever delimitation order issued by the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) on March 26, 2007, Bhutan is divided into 47 constituencies. The delimitation exercise of 2017,² decided to retain the number of constituencies at 47.

¹ Elections Commission of Bhutan, *Statistical Information on Elections of Bhutan (2006 - 2015)*, 2019

² The Election Act of Bhutan mandates that delimitation exercises be carried out every 10 years to review the number of parliamentary constituencies reflective of the demographic changes.

National Council (NC)

The Council is an apolitical house of review. It consists of 25 members, one from each of the 20 dzongkhags (districts) of Bhutan, and five eminent members nominated by His Majesty the King.

Each gewog (block of villages) in a dzongkhag nominates a candidate. If a gewog has more than one candidate, the candidates face election at the gewog level and move to the dzongkhag level to face candidates from other gewogs.

On the other hand, if a gewog has only one candidate, his/her election is done through a yes or no vote. However, it is not mandatory for a gewog to nominate a candidate for the NC elections. For example, in the 2018 council elections, Samdrup Jongkhar did not have a candidate from as many as four gewogs.

National Assembly (NA)

On the other hand, the Assembly consists of elected members from 47 constituencies.

“Before selecting your bulls, select the herd.” Many of us would have heard this ancient oriental wisdom. I remember hearing my late father share it with his fellow farmers when I was a boy. In a way, elections to the Assembly are an allegory of this rustic wisdom.

Elections to the Assembly are held in a unique two-round voting system. The first is the primary round, when the electorate vote for the party of their choice.

There were four parties contesting the last Assembly elections in 2018. In the primary round, two parties with the highest number of nationwide votes qualify for the general round held subsequently. People cast their votes on the basis of party leadership, party manifesto, as well as the tentative candidates for the various constituencies. In the primary round, voters select the proverbial herd to ensure that the eventual bulls bear good pedigree.

In the general elections, each of the two parties that have emerged victorious in the primary round, nominates a candidate for each of the 47 constituencies. Members of parliament are elected using a first-past-the-post voting system. At this stage, the farmer moves deeper within the herd and selects his bulls. The general round is driven by the vigour, verbosity, and veracity of the candidates representing the various constituencies.

At the end of the election, 47 candidates from either of the two parties won the election. The party winning the majority (a minimum of 24) of the constituencies gets to form the government. The other party, with at least one member, forms the opposition in the Assembly.

Voting

Article seven of the Constitution of Bhutan gives the right to vote as part of the fundamental rights of the Bhutanese people. Most democratic governments around the world consider participating in national elections a right of citizenship. In some countries, where voting is considered a duty, voting at elections has been made compulsory and regulated in the national Constitution and electoral laws.

According to International IDEA,³ compulsory voting is not a new concept. Some of the first countries that introduced mandatory voting laws were Belgium in 1892, Argentina in 1914, and Australia in 1924. There are also examples of countries such as Venezuela and the Netherlands, which at one time in their history practiced compulsory voting, but have since abolished it.

As per a report published by IDEA, based on data from 203 countries, voting is compulsory only in 27 -- or barely 13 percent -- of the countries. Bhutan belongs to the major league, where voting is optional. However, many Bhutanese still do not believe that voting is not compulsory.

In 2008, I failed to convince my wife that voting was not compulsory. Believing that voting was an important part of her national identity, she chose to ignore my advice, and travelled all the way from Thimphu to Samdrup Jongkhar, with other like-minded people, to cast her vote.

³ International IDEA (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance), is an intergovernmental organisation, based in Stockholm, Sweden, that supports sustainable democracy worldwide.

Voting may not be compulsory but then, as W Edwards Deming⁴ said, even survival is not mandatory! A cousin of mine once asked me, “Acho (brother), I believe they will keep a record of voters and then one day those who do not vote will be punished”. If you have not committed a crime, not committing it repeatedly doesn’t make you a criminal, I said. My answer did not convince him.

Secrecy of Ballots

The fundamentals of democracy are universal adult franchise and secrecy of ballots. The essence and understanding of “secret” allow Bhutan’s electorate to vote without fear or favour. It is more important for ballots to be secret than sacred, even if we believe in the purification of our electronic voting machines, for there should be no place for emotion in politics. Your vote should be based on objective choice. Go for selection by elimination, if you do not know any of the candidates, but vote you must!

During the last elections, an elderly woman in Samdrup Jongkhar was heard seeking advice from her brother in Thimphu. “Nuchu (younger brother),” she enquired, “Phuntsho wants to take us to Daifam in his Bolero. What should we do?” She was referring to an upcoming wedding ceremony of one of her relatives at Jomotshangkha, while Phuntsho was one of the local political leaders. The brother advised her to go ahead and take the ride. The logic was that no one would know who they actually voted for, behind the cardboard booths.

Similarly, once I received a call from an unregistered number. After introducing himself, Dawa invited me to come to the town “later in the evening”. I was confused, even a bit annoyed. My wife even suggested, “Who is bigger? He or you? Who is he to just call you to town?”

Later, I understood that Dawa was an active political supporter. A political candidate that he was patronising had come to know that some 20 of us living in Thimphu enjoy some good influence in our community. He intended to throw a dinner to “get-to-know each other”. I checked with my brother and uncle; they were going. We went, met Dawa and his political candidate and enjoyed a scrumptious dinner. The ballot is, after all, secret!

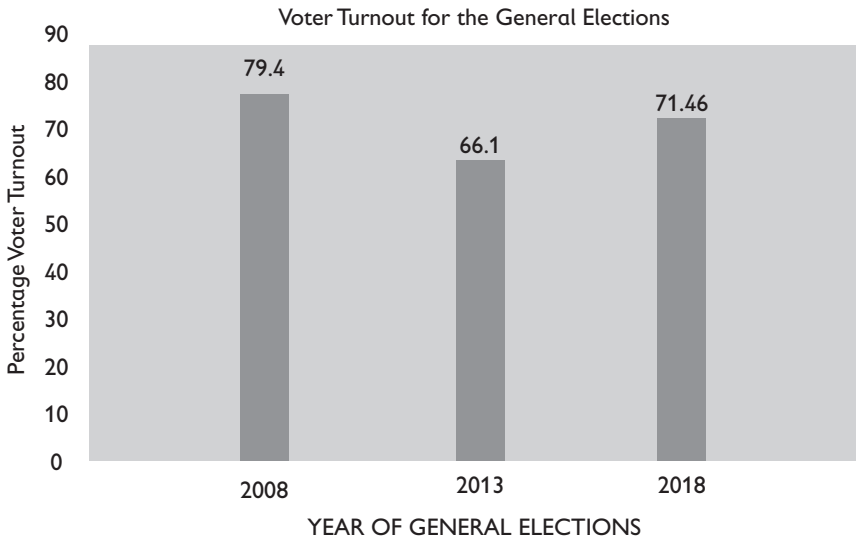
⁴ W Edwards Deming (1900 – 1993) was an American professor and management thinker.

Voter Turnout

The voter turnout for the first general elections of 2008 was 79.38 percent,⁵ high enough to impress international media and observers. Presenting their findings on the first General Elections, 2008, the European Union Election Observation Mission⁶ reported that “...24 March marks a successful and orderly change of political system in Bhutan from an absolute Monarchy to a Constitutional Monarchy. The enthusiastic voter participation with 79.4% turnout and commitment of state institutions to support the democratic process provide a solid foundation for a credible democracy.”

The New York Times,⁷ on the other hand, reported: “While turnout was heavier than in many countries more experienced with voting -- nearly 80 percent by the time polls closed at 5 p.m. -- the results left some analysts wondering how democracy would actually function.”

The graph below⁸ presents the overall voter turnout for the three general elections held in Bhutan so far.



⁵ Elections Commission of Bhutan, *Statistical Information on Elections of Bhutan (2006 - 2015)*, 2019

⁶ EU Election Observation Mission, *Bhutan, Final Report*, 2008

⁷ Somini Sengupta, “Heavy Turnout in First Bhutan Election,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/25/world/asia/25bhutan.html>

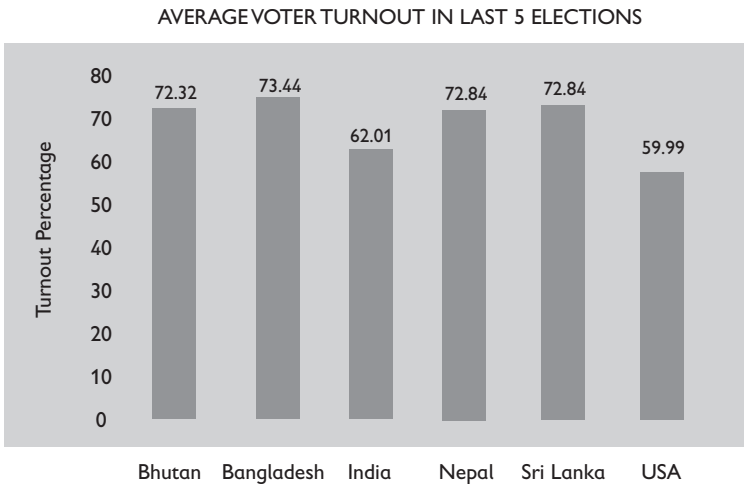
⁸ Elections Commission of Bhutan, *Statistical Information on Elections of Bhutan (2006 - 2015)*, 2019

After a dip (66.10 percent) in the second general elections, voter turnout improved significantly to 71.46 percent in the third elections. It is tempting to believe that the high turnout in the first elections was driven by Royal command, beginner enthusiasm and a sense of responsibility among the electorate. Perhaps, it was also an exhibition of patriotism, or the general understanding among Bhutanese that voting was compulsory.

The reason, among others, for the improvement during the third elections could be the ECB extending the postal ballot facility to more voters, the introduction of the Paper Ballot Facilitation Booth (PFBF), and Mobile Voting Booths (MVB).

Heavy Turnout in Bhutan

It may be interesting to compare Bhutan’s experience with other countries. Presented below is the average voter turnout of Bhutan for the last three general elections, compared with the average voter turnout of four South Asian countries and the USA (based on data available at International IDEA), for their last five parliamentary elections.



It is noteworthy that Bhutan’s average voter turnout is comparable with other South Asian countries. Indeed, Bhutan’s turnout is far better than India’s. It is also interesting to note that the more mature democracies of India and USA show relatively lower voter turnout than the relative newcomers to democracy.

It may also be relevant to reflect on the voter turnout for Bhutan's local government (LG) elections. The ECB press release declaring the results of the 3rd LG elections in December, 2021, states that the overall voter turnout was 68.42 percent. This was a significant improvement over the 55.8 percent turnout for the 2nd LG elections of 2016, and 56 percent turnout for the first elections of 2011. On average, voter turnout for the LG elections has been relatively lower than for the general elections.

As the 2021 LG elections were held under the foreboding environment of the COVID-19 pandemic, it may be safe to assume that the marked improvement in voter turnout can be attributed to the additional facilities, including a large number of PFBs and MVBs instituted by the ECB.

The postal ballot allowed people residing outside their demkhongs (voting constituencies) to vote in person using paper ballots. On the other hand, the mobile booths encouraged and enabled senior citizens, physically challenged voters and persons living with disabilities to vote.

Lessons Learned

Let us see what Bhutanese democracy has learned in the span of three elections. What lessons can we use, as the fourth general elections are about a year to come?

One thing most of us now know is – do not take our rural electorate for granted. Our rural siblings and cousins know a good politician when they see one. I was recently discussing the next NC elections with an uncle in the village. Even before I could finish my suggestion about the next candidate, he said, "...whatever it may be, for me it will always be Dhendup...".

People have come to understand and appreciate the secrecy of the ballots they cast. No one now walks gingerly to the polling booths. A voter goes to vote feeling informed and wise, often smiling like the proverbial Cheshire cat. The otherwise illiterate people have picked up political literacy pretty quickly. They needed no evening classes or continuing education. Do not look for the gullible rural voters; they are no more!

Role of Social Media

When the first elections were held in 2008, social media was in its relative infancy in Bhutan. As per the 13th Annual Report (2020-2021) of Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority (BICMA), total mobile subscribers in Bhutan rose by 3.2 percent from the year 2020, and currently stands at 762,965 subscribers. With Internet connectivity and the use of smartphones increasing by the day, a lot of political electioneering takes place online through social media.

Political parties and politicians have been using various techniques to manipulate public opinion in their favour. Digital information operation is the term used to define “a co-ordinated attempt to manipulate an information environment in a systemic/strategic way, using means which are coordinated, covert and inauthentic, in order to achieve political or social objectives”.⁹

Manipulations involve the use of “different tools, such as the spread of disinformation and fake news, the use of bots and trolls, astroturfing (creating artificial support for an idea) or doxing (coordinated attacks on an individual about personal matters)”.

Based on their field research conducted in Tunisia, Panama, and Bolivia during their last elections, IDEA recommends that electoral management bodies (ECB in Bhutan) should, among others, strive to increase their technical and human resources to monitor online activities by political parties and candidates.

Similarly, political parties are advised to create online platforms where all relevant information, including their expenditure, are clearly stated in a legible format and shared publicly. “Knowing what each party is doing online, and how much resources they are pouring into those activities, is the beginning of protecting the integrity of democracy”, IDEA advises.

Political parties should also commit to an ethical code on how to conduct themselves online, refusing to use communication techniques that cannot/ do not pass public scrutiny or meet ECB regulations.

⁹ International IDEA, “Protecting Political Campaigns from Digital Threats, Insights from Tunisia, Panama and Bolivia,” Fact Sheet, March 2020, <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/protecting-political-campaigns-from-digital-threats.pdf>

There is also a need to strengthen the legal framework on the use of social media. As we see an increasing number of non-resident Bhutanese participate in national elections, foreign influence -- both from legitimate Bhutanese voters, as well as from unwanted sources -- needs to be prevented.

Voting from Place of Residence

As many voters live away from their constituencies, exercising franchise involves substantial time and money. For example, a voter living in Thimphu would need a minimum of a week of travel time and Nu. 20,000 -- a sizeable amount for most Bhutanese -- to vote from the registered polling booth in her constituency in Samdrup Jongkhar. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has made it even more challenging.

The thromde (municipal/city council) elections stand out in terms of disenfranchising an overwhelming majority of the residents, relevant to the outcome of an election. Section 100 of the Election Act of Bhutan mandates a voter to be registered in the civil registry and have a household number of civil registrations in that town for not less than one year, to be eligible to vote for the thromde elections.

As a result, as reported by Kuensel in its news report of 31 March, 2021, “there were only 8,007 registered voters for the third thromde elections held in 2021, although Thimphu’s population was reported at about 114,551.” In other words, hardly seven percent of the population voted to elect the Thimphu thrompon (mayor).

The figures and ratios for other thromdes were no better. “Having come so far with democracy and local government elections, the people are asking valid questions as to for whom the elections should happen. For example, the world over, residents vote for their representatives. This does not happen in Bhutan. So, what are the consequences?” lamented one reporter.

Under the current rules, hobnobbing with a small minority can make a candidate a thrompon. Going forward, one hopes that the ECB will continue to improve access and eligibility, so as to enfranchise the maximum number of Bhutanese people for a given election.

State-Public Partnership

A successful democracy requires a successful electoral system. A successful electoral system needs to be voter friendly and voter inclusive. An election cannot be successful without a trusted partnership between the state and the electorate.

The ECB must come half-the-way in terms of creating the right atmosphere and accessibility for voters, with citizens covering the other half. Eligible citizens must make enough effort to cast their votes. Despite some limitations and strictures, the ECB has been improving acceptance and accessibility, to encourage citizens to vote.

Ready for a New PM?

On a lighter note, Bhutan seems to have championed the ability to find a party president at the last hour. While our elected prime ministers have all been world class and top performing, no one, so far, has been able to get re-elected. Therefore, if our short electoral history is anything to go by, will Bhutan have a new prime minister in about a year's time?

Endnote: “Everyone knows who we should be voting for. The trouble is no one knows who this ‘everyone’ is.” Fellow countrymen, let us continue to vote; we have nothing to lose except our franchise!