

# Apolitical Nature of the Civil Service

*Pema Tshoki*

Being apolitical is a core conduct and a foundational civil service value. All public servants in Bhutan are mandated to remain apolitical at all times. However, it becomes extremely difficult to remain non-partisan when politics is so intertwined with daily lives.

On the one hand, the Constitution of Bhutan (Article 7) bestows all citizens with the right to exercise his or her fundamental rights, including freedom of speech. On the other hand, Article 26 of the Constitution and Section 3.3.1 of the Bhutan Civil Service Rules and Regulations direct all Bhutanese public servants to be non-political and neutral. The interpretation of these clauses causes unwanted and unintended discrepancies for government officials and holds Bhutan back from being a vibrant and wholesome democracy.

The non-political policy and the rigid regulations of the civil service prevent its public servants from attending campaigns, forums, and from having political discussions. Many officials have anonymously complained about their inability to meet candidates in person. Without the educated population in the audience, forums often turn out to be abusive and defamatory.<sup>1</sup>

On top of that, the public servants themselves cannot clarify their queries and ask questions on the party manifestos. As they are not allowed to attend electoral campaigns and gatherings, civil servants are not able to make informed decisions. Another issue arises when political parties (governing, opposition, and contesting) offer political positions to capable officials or to those of high-standing authorities who have reached their age of superannuation.

The apolitical requirement for public servants is difficult to maintain. It gets hard especially in times of local government elections. The forums and campaigns of the gups, mangmis, and tshogpas are not publicly advertised by media houses. When casting their votes, public servants do

<sup>1</sup> Tenzin Lamsang, "Of apolitical voters and postal ballots," *The Bhutanese*, March 7, 2013, <https://thebhutanese.bt/of-apolitical-voters-and-postal-ballots/>

not know who to vote for when they have not met the candidates and are not familiar with their manifestos. They do not exercise their right to ask around, to abide by the rule to be apolitical. This eventually leads to a very low outcome of votes in local government elections or, worse, electing the wrong candidate.

Lastly, the meaning and interpretation of “apolitical” itself is unclear and not definitive. Apolitical is not defined so everyone attaches their own understanding and meaning to it. A report by the UNDP has also emphasised the vagueness of the definition and the need to define it clearly.<sup>2</sup> The confusion has also been raised in several national newspaper articles where civil servants have anonymously explained their situation.

The concept of ‘politics’ carries a negative connotation because it is understood to be ‘dirty’ and manipulative in developing countries. The meaning attached to it is also tainted by cynicism and scepticism.<sup>3</sup> In fact, many public servants do not know what it means to be apolitical. So first and foremost, Bhutan and its people have to get rid of the negative mindset of politics and reconsider it in a more objective light. The power of politics, at an individual level, and with organisational, societal, and national perspective, is immeasurable and too important to be ignored.

## **Apolitical Public Servants**

The public service system itself is known to be political throughout history. Publicly elected candidates who serve in the highest positions like the Prime Minister, President, or Ministers, are the ones who sometimes pick and appoint their own favoured employees in organisations. Those employees are usually the ones who support, praise, and even cover up corrupt acts of the politicians. If this continues, the whole system will be weakened, with senior public servants being politicised.

Maintaining an apolitical civil service, yet having to make radical choices to elect a candidate, makes the process cumbersome. Running government services and administration without political affiliations and considerations

---

<sup>2</sup> UNDP, *Bhutan National Human Development Report: Ten Years of Democracy in Bhutan*, (United Nations Development Programme Bhutan & Parliament of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2019) <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/nhdr-2019ii.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Frazer, “Citizenship Education: Anti-Political Culture and Political Education in Britain.” *Political Studies* 48, no. 1 (2000): 88–103, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00252>.

is not easy. The monk body is required to remain above politics, and rightly so, as spiritual leaders should not indulge in politics. Public servants exercise the right to vote yet have to refrain from any dealing with politics. Separating the civil service from politicians who eventually have to work together is not possible; therefore, more responsive ways and programmes are needed for the parties and government to come together, by being flexible in the rules to be apolitical.

In casual discussions with a few public servants, one said that it was inevitable and unavoidable to have a political school of thought, when most national activities are halted because of the completion of a government's tenure and the start of a new one. It was one of the greatest challenges to remain neutral, as the minister, who is a politician, as the head of the agency drives the ministry's vision and mandates for five years. They infuse political agendas, which are then supported by senior civil servants, which usually causes unanticipated conflicts.

## **Weaknesses**

Although having the bureaucracy separated from politics can ensure accountability, fair promotions, and ethical behaviour, there are several disadvantages. When a person is stopped from sharing opinions and views about something they think is important, it can lead to the degradation of work productivity.

To direct officials to be apolitical, with no clear instructions, is like forcing them to be passive where they cannot voice their opinions and are taught to suppress their views. Such inflexible rules can make civil servants unethical. To deal with immoral acts, they usually make fake accounts on social media and express their views, usually posting information and pictures about the political candidate, which could lead to negative perceptions. In reality, civil servants are allowed to attend political debates but not campaigns, which most of the officials did not know about. The subtle state between the known and unknown is caused because there are no formal documents or clear policies on the apolitical nature of the civil service.

## **Political Acuity**

The term political acuity has gained much popularity in developing countries for its benefits. It is the ability of administrators to draw a fine

line between the political environment of civil servants and the role played by politicians.<sup>4</sup> In general terms, it can be understood as a form of critical thinking and behaving to understand a politician's world. Canada is one of the pivotal countries, introducing political acumen with their "Political Acumen Toolkit" to their public servants.<sup>5</sup> It offers information and training to build official relationships at all levels, helps manage individual and group risks, and furthers effective communication and stakeholder engagement. The toolkit also consists of case studies based on unethical dismissal, false expense accounts, council allegations against the Mayor and more. However, Bhutan needs to make such guidelines fit our national context.

## **Apolitical Media**

The influence of mass media is becoming greater in our everyday lives and, likewise, its effect on politics is growing. Public servants have to fully rely on information from different media channels to know about the political parties and candidates. With this power, media organisations can even create and manipulate stories influencing their consumers, if they are not professional and responsible.

At the backend of the spectrum, journalists and reporters find difficulty in finding legitimate views and opinions because well-informed citizens do not share their expertise on political matters. They lack access to information to report on current matters. Even if relevant information is obtained, the credibility of the news gets lost without the source's name and details. Moreover, debates and forums are limited when public servants do not participate. It leaves the media houses with limited news to cover.

## **Conclusion**

Being political does not mean being pro-government, anti-government, or indulging in dirty activities. Being political also does not mean devaluing the Royal Civil Service Commission's ethics and values. There is a misunderstanding of the word "political" in Bhutanese society and it is prevalent among the civil servants as well. With the duty to protect and

---

<sup>4</sup> David Siegel, "Public Servants and Politics: Developing Political Acuity in Local Government," *Canadian Public Administration* 63, no. 4 (2020): 620–39, <https://doi.org/10.1111/capa.12381>.

<sup>5</sup> *Political Acumen Toolkit*, (Canadian Association Municipal Administrators, 2021), <https://politicalacumen.camacam.ca/>.

promote national interests at all times, it is crucial for public officials to take a stand and share fact-based opinions as citizens. If done so rightly, societal and civil issues can be solved through votes.

As a young democracy our country has not reached a point of political awakening; however, it is never too early to try. The system could have improved relationships between the civil servants, particularly the senior cohorts, and the political leaders who act as head of government agencies.

To start off, a definition for the word “apolitical” is imperative. It should be well balanced between political neutrality and political rights. Certain political activities, like taking part in elections as a candidate, contributing money, serious advocacy for and against a party or candidate, and defamation, should be strictly prohibited. Therefore, the definition of “apolitical” should be restructured with a broader and a wholesome meaning to it.

Media literacy in political engagement should be advocated to the Bhutanese public servants. Bhutanese could use such skills to build the ability to understand different kinds of information from various forms of media and social platforms. Such programmes should also stress building critical thinking. Likewise, programmes on political acuity could also be started for senior civil servants. Such courses will equip them with competencies to manage disputes between administrators and political leaders.

While it can seem overwhelming to be involved in politics, it is necessary, as elections have become part of our lives in a constitutional democracy. The decision to cast a vote or not is itself a political act. In fact, every decision we make affects politics and is affected by politics. The political rights of public servants should be used as an instrument to shield from tyranny, negative politics, and overt influences.<sup>6</sup> Instead of limiting and building a glass ceiling that stops civil servants from healthy participation in politics, the rules on the apolitical nature of public servants should be widened.

Like the great Greek orator, Pericles said:

“Just because you do not take interest in politics, doesn’t mean politics won’t take an interest in you.”

<sup>6</sup> Nima Dorji, “The Politics of Apoliticality: In the Conflict between Political Rights and Political Neutrality, Facelessness Wins,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3266270>.