

Democracy and Gross National Happiness: Beyond the Challenges

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In December 2021, Bhutan held local government elections nationwide. The BBS broadcasted some scenes of villagers carefully listening to the candidates' promises and pledges during the campaign. Voters later discussed with their families and relatives about who was best qualified to be the gups (headman) and mangmis (deputy) in their gewogs. On polling day, I could see the old and the young lined up at their polling stations to elect local leaders to guide their community's development over the next five years.

Ever since the transition to a democratic government, elections have been repeatedly held to select new leaders for the country. The people no longer need explanations about what an election is. Voters know that the future of the country can be determined by their ballots. Thus, electoral democracy in Bhutan is starting to grow roots. But how did the political system originally develop?

The uniqueness of Bhutan's democracy is characterised by Gross National Happiness (GNH). His Majesty the King once stated that "the nature of GNH will never change but how we achieve GNH will". Initiated by the leadership of the Kings, the successful democratisation of the country has been a major milestone in good governance reform since the foundation of the Nation State in 1907. Thus, democracy is expected to function as a pathway for the government's pursuit of GNH. This paper looks at the extent to which Bhutan has progressed towards realising these ideals and will ask if the political system is effectively responding to emerging issues.

Over the past decades, Bhutan has rapidly developed economically, and the landscape of society has changed dramatically. Thousands of families have migrated from their villages to urban settlements seeking a better life. Relationships with family and neighbours are not as they used to be. The gap in living standards between urban and rural areas has widened. While the education level has improved, large numbers of well-educated young

people are unemployed and looking for job opportunities. Many children are communicating in English rather than in their native languages. The current situation offers an ideal opportunity to review the achievements of the past 15 years.

While Bhutan's democratic system has taken root and deepened in line with GNH, the country faces challenges ahead. This article looks at how the governance systems in Bhutan reflect the philosophy of GNH and explores how a unique political culture is developed. It will also highlight some of the critical challenges to democracy faced by the Government in its pursuit of GNH.

As a foreigner, I may not be the right person to discuss Bhutan's politics and GNH, but I would like to share my perspective to encourage discussion and debate on the challenging and vitally important issues currently faced by the nation. The purpose of this article is not just to point out domestic issues and describe the status quo; I am also personally seeking a way forward for Bhutan as a development practitioner.

Democracy and GNH: Growing the Concept

Democracy and GNH in Bhutan have developed in a co-evolutionary process. While democracy has functioned as a means to realise GNH, the development of GNH has itself facilitated a democratic system of governance. The Royal vision is reflected in the Constitution of Bhutan, enacted to introduce a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy in 2008, declaring the pursuit of GNH as a principle of state policy. At the same time, governments have continued their efforts to incorporate GNH into both politics and policy practice.

Ever since the concept of GNH was introduced in 1972, its philosophy has guided Bhutan's socio-economic development. The framework of four pillars and nine domains was established in the 2000s. Finally, the creation of the GNH index and a policy screening tool has enabled the practical application of GNH principles for policy making. These tools have been used to guide policy formulation and to monitor its progress. For example, in the 12th five-year plan, the GNH index is used to determine resource

allocation for local governments.¹ Hence, the concept has been integrated into the governance systems and has strengthened the democratic structure.

The GNH Index is one of the main tools used to take the voice of people to the government. It has been used to measure progress in society and to monitor social transformation from when the survey was started in 2007. The Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies initiated the survey to facilitate evidence-based policymaking.

Since the third survey was implemented in 2015, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has been involved in promoting the initiative. The fourth survey is scheduled to be conducted in 2022. The survey will be particularly important in assessing the impact of COVID-19 on individuals and on society as a whole. Its results will be reflected in policies and plans as a reflection of the voice of the people.

Thus, the fundamental principles of GNH have enabled democratic reforms and vice versa in a co-evolutionary causal chain. They have, of necessity, adapted and co-evolved. GNH and democracy in Bhutan share much in common and both contribute to the uniqueness of the nation's democratic culture. In this regard, these concepts should ideally be complementary rather than contradictory. However, in the next section, I will highlight some of the challenges faced by GNH. It is vital that these issues are addressed if Bhutan's unique democracy is to be sustained.

Election and Community

The role that community plays in society is much discussed these days. In villages, strong social networks create collective action, provide social benefit, and foster well-being.² As such, social bonds between people are considered an important asset and a public good of communities. Since the introduction of democracy in Bhutan, how have relationships within and between families and neighbourhoods changed?

¹ Gross National Happiness Commission (2019) *Twelfth Five Year Plan 2018–2023, Volume I: Main Document*. Royal Government of Bhutan, Thimphu.

² Putnam, R. (2001) *The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Life*. The American Prospect. December 19th, 2001. Available at <https://prospect.org/infrastructure/prosperous-community-social-capital-public-life/>

A study based on the GNH surveys carried out in 2007 and 2010, found that the introduction of electoral democracy did not increase voters' trust in their neighbours or communities.³ This may have been because political difference can be a source of community division and family break-up.

At the national assembly election in 2018, a shopkeeper in Gasa town said that people had little interest in political parties and candidates and did not discuss them.⁴ This was because the community was afraid of the division that might occur if they expressed support for a particular party in a small village. While elections are a cornerstone of parliamentary democracy, campaigns and voters' decisions should not disrupt trust among families and neighbours.

Community networks can play a major role in public policy and effective governance. A good example of this comes from Japan, where the role of community has largely been discussed in the context of risk mitigation after large-scale natural disasters. In 2011, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake occurred in Tohoku, triggering a massive tsunami. Despite the severity of the event, a large number of people could be saved as communities and schools had prepared themselves through regular evacuation drills.⁵ It should be noted too that, due to the strong bonds between people in these communities, more lives were saved by neighbours than by rescue teams.

Family dynamics and the role that communities play in Bhutanese society are changing. As community vitality is one of the nine domains of GNH, electoral systems should not create divisions within communities and families. Therefore, Bhutan needs to consider how to promote relationships, strong networks, and trust within communities, as well as how to create a culture of engagement on public issues through democratic systems.

Political Participation

Political participation is a fundamental feature of representative democracy. However, are all voices in Bhutan equally heard?

³ Chopel, S. (2015) *Does Democracy Promote Social Capital? Evidence from Bhutan*. Journal of Bhutan Studies Vol.29-2.

⁴ Nima (2018) *Gasa Residents Reluctant to Discuss Politics*. Kuensel Online on September 4th, 2018. Available on <https://kuenselonline.com/gasa-residents-reluctant-to-discuss-politics/>

⁵ World Bank (2012) *The Great East Japan Earthquake - Learning from Megadisasters: Knowledge Notes, Executive Summary*. Washington, D.C.

In 2017, the Thimphu Declaration was announced at the 2nd National Conference on Women in Governance, Leadership & Politics, to increase women's representation in politics to 40% by 2030. Between 2013 and 2015, the number of women in parliament in Bhutan increased from 8.3% to 15.2%. However, this is still far below the global average of 22% and the regional average of 19.6%.⁶ In addition, GNH indicators show that gender inequality in happiness continues to exist in the country. In the 2010 survey, 46% of men reached a satisfactory level of happiness, whereas only 36% of women did.⁷ A similar trend was shown by the 2015 survey: women experienced significantly lower satisfaction than men.

As well as the gender gap in politics, we must also consider the political participation of young people. Due to the pandemic, the youth unemployment rate sharply rose to 22.6% in 2020.⁸ During this difficult time, many young people have been looking for job opportunities abroad as described in the internationally acclaimed Bhutanese film, *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom*, which features a young teacher who dreams of moving to Australia.

How can politics be brought closer to young people? One study highlighted the lack of democratic culture, such as engaging in equal and critical dialogue, for Bhutanese youth in the public sphere.⁹ While it is important to value harmony and respect older generation and authority, free and open political debate must be promoted, especially among young people.

These facts show the necessity of political reform to reduce gender gaps and increase youth participation in Bhutan. Politics should not be controlled by a limited group of people. This is a basic principle of democracy. Therefore, efforts to increase participation in politics and improve gender and age equality are essential for making the voices of all people in the country heard.

⁶ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2020) *Strengthening Women's Political Participation in Bhutan*. Available on <https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/strengthening-women%E2%80%99s-political-participation-bhutan>

⁷ Jamtsho, Y. (2021) *Gender-sensitive Neighbourhood Planning*. Kuensel Online on March 20th, 2021. Available on <https://kuenselonline.com/gender-sensitive-neighbourhood-planning/>

⁸ National Statistics Bureau (2020) *2020 Labour Force Survey Report Bhutan*. Royal Government of Bhutan, Thimphu.

⁹ Suhonen, R. (2014) *Youth Civic Engagement in Bhutan: Obedient Citizens or Social Activities?* Available on <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1483690&cdswid=1901>

Anti-Corruption for Good Governance

Although good governance encompasses multiple elements, international organisations, such as the World Bank and UNDP, share the common understanding that anti-corruption is a key component of good governance. Moreover, anti-corruption is one of the four dimensions of GNH, alongside effective government, democratic culture, and trust in institutions and leaders.¹⁰ How has democracy promoted good governance?

According to global corruption indicators, Bhutan is one of the least corrupt countries in the world. For example, Bhutan ranks 24th out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index 2020, published by Transparency International. The World Bank also gave Bhutan a score of 91.83 for its control of corruption, according to the 2019 Worldwide Governance Indicators, making it one of the cleanest countries in the world. The people of Bhutan should be proud of their honest and politically clean culture.

However, in contrast to the picture presented by international indicators, many corruption scandals have been reported in the media. Many Bhutanese people believe that corruption has significantly increased since the introduction of democracy, and also believe that the influence of money in politics is an open secret. Large enterprises and businesses are often willing to donate money to support political parties, as they reap benefits if those parties win the election and control the government. Indeed, during the third parliamentary elections of 2018, leaders of the two political parties expressed concerns about the influence of money on people's voting.¹¹

Democracy should not be hijacked by money politics. While it is difficult to capture the full picture of corruption because of its closed and secretive nature, it is possible to derive some understanding of it from people's perceptions. In the National Corruption Barometer Survey, nearly one third of people (31.5%) maintained that corruption had steadily increased and had become of increasing concern since the introduction of democracy.¹² The number of complaints about corruption reported to the

¹⁰ Rapten, P. (2007) *Good Governance and Gross National Happiness*. in Gross National Happiness Survey Findings.

¹¹ Dema, T. (2018) *Money in Politics, An Open Secret*. Kuensel Online on August 25th, 2018. Available at <https://kuenselonline.com/money-in-politics-an-open-secret/>

¹² Bhutan Transparency Initiative (2016) *National Corruption Barometer Survey 2016*. Thimphu.

Anti-Corruption Commission also increased from 283 cases in 2015 to 396 cases in 2019.¹³

In December, 2020, His Majesty the King issued a royal kasho (decree) on civil service reform. The reform emphasised accountability and transparency of the government as well as the need for efficient public service delivery to achieve clean politics.

Digital Communities

The media plays an important role in democracy. For many years, Bhutan's major source of information was mostly dominated by mass media such as TV and newspapers. In recent years, however, the Internet has increasingly become a common tool not only in urban cities but also in rural communities. Today, almost all households (97%) have access to mobile phones and 64.6% own smartphones.¹⁴ How has the prevalence of such devices shaped public discourse and influenced politics?

Increasing access to the Internet has facilitated new digital platforms and communities. The rise of the Internet has made it easier for individuals to disseminate information through blogs and social networking sites (SNS). The boundary between sender and receiver no longer exists as it used to. Besides online news articles, social media has also become a significant influence on public opinion and politics.

Today, fake news and hate speech on digital platforms are emerging issues. Even in lockdowns during the COVID-19 crisis, SNS provided useful information for our daily lives. However, some of the posts were just false rumours and fake news. Such unreliable information caused anxiety and confusion among people. While social media is a powerful tool for encouraging public discourse, people should avoid misuse by enhancing digital literacy.

Thus, new digital communities have come to play an important role in our daily lives. These tools give us speedy and timely access to news and information. Freedom of speech and open discourse are fundamental for

¹³ Anti-Corruption Commission of Bhutan (2019) *ACC Annual Report 2019*. Thimphu.

¹⁴ Department of Information Technology & Telecom, Ministry of Information & Communication (2018) *Digital Drukyl: 12th Five Year Plan Flagship Programme: Draft Blueprint*. Royal Government of Bhutan, Thimphu.

the growth of democracy, and social media has the potential to facilitate them. As community vitality is one of the domains of GNH, the impact of emerging digital communities also needs to be studied in both politics and GNH.

Democracy under COVID-19

Ever since the onset of the pandemic in January 2020, we have been fighting COVID-19 and are still in the middle of it. In many countries, policy makers and scientists have repeatedly debated the response to countless waves of COVID-19 and tried to find new directions to maintain a balance between public health and the economy. In this situation, how has COVID-19 affected politics and development in Bhutan?

Some democratic countries, such as the U.S. and India, could not take effective measures, and recorded high infection and mortality rates. As Bhutan has proven to the world, political leadership is one of the most essential factors in the control of pandemics. The government efforts to protect the people have resulted in rapid vaccination coverage.

On the other hand, after the official announcement of the COVID-19 management policies recently, many criticisms against the government were popping up on the online community. Politicians and policymakers, especially in emergencies, need to be more sensitive to the voice of the people. One of the lessons learnt from the fight against COVID-19 is that people reaffirmed the importance of ensuring transparency and accountability in decision-making processes.

The pandemic has had an enormous impact on the economy and society, and it has derailed the progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The UN has warned that world poverty will revert to the level it was 30 years ago.¹⁵ In Bhutan, five goals out of the 17 goals are particularly at high risk of not achieving the targets by 2030 --- poverty, gender equality, decent work, reducing inequalities and partnerships.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ahmed, K. (2020) *Coronavirus Could Turn Back the Clock 30 Years on Global Poverty*. The Guardian on April 9th, 2020. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/apr/09/coronavirus-could-turn-back-the-clock-30-years-on-global-poverty>

¹⁶ Lhaden, Y. (2021) *Five SDG Goals Likely at Risk from Covid-19*. Kuensel Online on July 17th, 2021. Available at <https://kuenselonline.com/five-sdg-goals-likely-at-risk-from-covid-19/>

Thus, the pandemic brought a major risk to both democracy and GNH. Containment of the pandemic requires a high level of governance in crisis management and response. It also requires people's trust in the government for intervention in economic activities, as they largely affect our lives and slow down development.

Beyond the Challenges

While democracy is considered a universal value, it has been threatened by various forces globally. Looking at neighbouring Asian countries such as Afghanistan and Myanmar, democracy and peace are vulnerable in the hands of violence and military forces. We can see that sustaining stable democratic governance is not always achieved easily and requires a lot of effort and responsibility from the people. It is necessary to continue making certain efforts to retain democracy as part of political systems.

Bhutan is almost in the stage of growing out of infancy in terms of democratic governance since its transition in 2008. Democracy is no longer about political formalities and rituals but of quality. In this article, I have attempted to highlight some challenges confronting democracy and GNH from multiple perspectives. The quality of democracy also affects development. There is a need to recognise that it is not only the government that has to play a role in improving the political system, but it is also the responsibility of every individual.

Bhutan is now ready to graduate from the group of Least Developed Countries (LDC) in 2023. However, the world is changing rapidly, and our future becomes more uncertain than ever. Bhutan is facing emerging challenges ahead, such as controlling the pandemic, climate change, addressing new technology and innovation, and military conflict between powerful nations.

Appropriate and timely political decisions will become more important in overcoming these global and domestic issues. Underpinned by democracy based on GNH, this uniqueness is an essential element in shaping the future of the country. Democracy and GNH in Bhutan continue to progress interactively and co-evolutionarily, going beyond the challenges.