

A Spirit of Democracy: Shifting Mindsets and Attitudes

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Democracy is on the decline globally. With a war in Europe, the world is becoming more authoritarian, and dictatorships are on the rise. The 2022 Democracy report highlights data to show that democratic advances made in the past three decades are now “eradicated”.¹ There is “toxic polarisation” and a record 35 countries are facing threats to freedom of expression compared with only five countries in 2011. Governments are reported to be using misinformation -- some would say disinformation -- to shape domestic and international opinion.

Bhutan is listed among the top 30-40% of countries on V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy index for 2021,² in the same group of countries as Nepal, Mongolia, Namibia, and Colombia amongst others. Bhutan’s Press Freedom ranks 65³ out of 180 countries and has been improving incrementally in recent years. And its transparency index is 25th out of 180 countries.

As the world’s democrats grapple with democratic decline, there is a visible shift in Bhutan towards deepening democratisation. The citizenry is being asked to take on more responsibilities, and public institutions are the focus of a move on accountability and transparency. The call comes from the head of state, His Majesty the King of Bhutan:

“The immediate duty of every single Bhutanese today is to bring about a successful transition to democracy.”

Such a call requires a change in mindset and behaviour in a country where democracy is still largely considered a “gift” from the Throne and has not come from the demands of its people. Despite the introduction of institutions, laws and processes for democracy (elections etc), it can be argued that a culture of democracy was absent when Bhutan became a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy in 2008. After nearly 14 years, the

¹ Boese A. Vanessa, et al., *Autocratisation Changing Nature? Democracy Report 2022*

² V-Dem publishes an annual report that describes the state of the world’s democracies.

³ Reporters Without Borders, “Bhutan,” 2021.

focus is now on building the mindsets and competencies of the voters to become more participatory in daily affairs.

His Majesty the King shares the idea of a “spirit of democracy” that “must be a part of one’s life at home with one’s family, in the community, at work and in the government. It depends, not on the form of government but on the principles, integrity, and values of the individual”.⁴

Re-imagine Governance

The COVID experience has brought home the point that top-down strategies alone cannot take care of problems or societal needs in Bhutan’s system of governance. Employment, health care and COVID precautions, environmental challenges, administrative and educational reform, and other emerging social needs cannot be resolved if the people are not involved and made responsible.

In April, the government takes a strategic shift in its management of the pandemic, by moving into a new phase that requires the people to take more responsibility for their own health and safety. This call for stronger citizen response and action is in line with trends in the system of governance that is moving towards more accountability.

Cultural Context – Democratic Culture

Bhutan, as a GNH society, recognises the strength of culture in determining the survival and well-being of society. In this context, this article looks at how democratic culture manifests itself in Bhutan, and the extent to which it impedes or helps to strengthen political change in the country.

His Majesty the King said:

“ ... if we want our democratic system to work, if we want a democracy that will fulfil the aspirations of our people, then we must take the next step – we must adopt the ideals and principles of democracy. We must build a democratic culture. This period when democracy takes root is a slow process. It takes time. But this process is crucial for the ultimate success of democracy in our country. It must help build strong citizens because strong citizens mean a strong Bhutan.”

⁴ Quoted in BCMD’s evaluation of citizenship education initiatives done in 2020

Culture is described as a way of life. Democratic culture can be interpreted as democratic values, beliefs, and practices that permeate our daily lives. Academics, however, point out that democratic culture exists when people want to and have the ability to participate in public affairs. There are many facets to democratic culture – political, civic, and participatory. Democracy theorists talk of a political culture that determines the success of democracies. Others see it from the perspective of the citizenry - civic and participatory culture with democratic values.

Western and Asian Thought

Political scientists identify a difference between Western and Asian political thinking. The West promulgates individuality and self-autonomy or independence. The West focuses on rules and laws while relationships are the bedrock of Asian society. Lucien Pye’s examination of political development in Asia focuses on different cultural attitudes towards power and authority. His study shows that Asian societies accept paternalistic leadership, the idea of community (as opposed to individualism), and dependency. He attributes this to “the complex personal bonding ties of superiors and subordinates, of patrons and clients -- ties in which it is often obscure who is manipulating whom, and for what purpose”.

The acceptance of authority is, therefore, “not inherently bad but rather is an acceptable key to finding personal security”. In an Asian context, the authority and elders are responsible for taking care of their family, community, and society. Bhutan’s democratic culture shares this context.

Cultural Attitudes and Dispositions

Dependency and paternalistic leadership are shaped by Bhutan’s history. With a monarchy that stabilised Bhutanese politics about 115 years ago, the single most visible cultural shift is for the populace to move from being subjects of a well-respected monarchy to being citizens of a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy.

Dependency is compounded by a general sense of deferment to authority in a hierarchical society where there is respect for the elder, or one in position of authority. People believe that the government -- begun even before democracy -- has a purpose of serving society and the common good.

The diverse communities share strong kinship, and people still identify themselves as coming from various regions, or the place of their ancestry. This partially explains why many have chosen not to shift their civic registration and continue to vote from their “village”, although they have been living outside in towns like Thimphu for decades.

The sense of deference to government is changing with democracy and with the forces of globalisation. There is a growing sense of individualism,⁵ of entitlement (where people assert their rights over responsibilities), and an emerging trend of polarising politics that is oftentimes the model in world politics today. This polarisation of society is more evident during elections and affects social relationships beyond political differences. Some families and groups of friends have stopped discussing politics during election periods to avoid a fractioning of relationships.⁶

In Bhutan’s context, democracy is not a goal but a means to good governance to bring about the GNH society. Such a perspective can be traced to the Buddhist notion of seeking enlightenment, not for oneself, but for the benefit of all living beings. Taken in this context, people’s desire and ability to engage is predicated on a desire to benefit everyone.

Today’s citizens are being urged to hold the government accountable, to engage more actively in keeping the country secure, and to ensure the success of democracy. A teacher in Paro notices a tendency among the youth: “Everybody is feeling entitled about their rights to free speech and expression, but no one is really taking any action.”

Some of this sense of dependency has been reinforced by a culture of development aid which perpetuated a donor-recipient mentality in past decades.

How can Bhutan foster a more democratic culture and society? This article examines this in the light of some key areas:

⁵ Karma Ura, *A proposal for GNH value education in schools*. Thimphu: Gross National Happiness Commission.

⁶ Press reports have highlighted some of these social fractions.

Education

Schools and educational institutions are the most influential places for the development of democratic culture, or more specifically, participatory attitudes and competencies.

School culture in Bhutan is, however, largely top-down, instructional, with limited opportunity for real-life learning and critical thinking. Studies⁷ show that students are often left out of decision-making and are rarely given opportunities to engage with school matters. Even teachers say they are often not consulted on matters of education. As for parents, many do not feel they have a role to play in determining the future of education or in the education of their children.

The focus on theory rather than experiential learning hinders intellectual growth and critical thinking, turning students into “collectors of information without connection to real life”.⁸ The Royal Education Council’s early reports affirm this tendency. Schools are repositories for the transfer of information but real learning, especially learning to equip youth for the participatory nature of democracy and decision-making, is minimal. There is scant grooming of the attitudes and dispositions needed to be more participatory citizens, such as being open to diverse views, the sharing of constructive feedback, and the confidence to take initiatives or contribute to decision-making.⁹

Bhutan’s current overhaul of the education curricula and system can integrate many of the lessons learnt from organisations outside government, such as CSOs and private institutions, that have been piloting aspects of citizenship education and introducing a more democratic culture in schools. Citizenship education programmes go beyond the knowledge focus of Civics that is taught from Class 7. Civics provides knowledge on government and democratic institutions and structures, and can often read like a list of jobs descriptions for institutional agencies and members of authority. Citizenship education uses the knowledge gained to go a step further by instilling attitudes and citizenship practices. Schools themselves

⁷ BCMD’s studies on evaluating citizenship education and work with youth in various workshops indicate that students are not often consulted.

⁸ Bhutans’ school system often fits with Paolo Freire’s banking deposit education theory. This describes a system where focus is on transference of information and knowledge that prevents real learning.

⁹ BCMD’s community mapping activities held with youth in schools and colleges over the years highlight these shortcomings.

can model democratic principles and culture through open deliberations, in school management and operations, and include teachers and students in decision-making. It can introduce service learning activities to give youth hands-on experience in tackling issues that they themselves have identified.

Democracy clubs in schools can move beyond going through the mechanics of voting. Law and media clubs can be expanded to include civic skills and competencies, such as identifying social needs, providing feedback to the school system so that young people practise being more participatory. Democracy and politics can be made more cross-cutting through all subjects.

At the university level, political science is offered in three out of 13 colleges. Universities can go beyond providing knowledge, and open up space for people to share their political thinking openly and to create safe spaces where a plurality of views can be debated. Research into political developments and democracy can be stepped up to provide information and feedback so necessary in a democracy.

Annual forums like the Bhutan Democracy Forum (organised by the BCMD, a CSO) held in the Royal University of Bhutan aspire to model a deliberative space where diverse opinions can be openly discussed. Such initiatives help to nurture a healthy democratic culture and are one of the few public forums for all political parties to come together outside the election period. For parties outside parliament, this keeps them socialised to public discussions and have their views heard.

Teachers and lecturers (many of whom are civil servants) hesitate to talk about politics in school. It is time to make politics and democracy a daily topic of conversation. The requirement for civil servants to be non-partisan does not mean educational institutes should keep silent on politics in a learning environment.

Civic Space

“ A strong civil society is a fundamental pillar of democracy,” said His Majesty the King of Bhutan early in democratic transition.

The most visible presence of civic space is the emergence of CSOs (civil society organisations), including a few working in the area of governance. But civic space in Bhutan is struggling under the weight of legislation and compliance requirements. Bhutan's civic space is expanding and, in 2021, same sex relations were decriminalised, while thousands have come forward to volunteer through various programmes to assist in COVID times. Bhutan can do more and learn from the tradition of self-help groups in rural communities that have modeled successful communities based on trust, community collaboration and cooperative action.

Civil society facilitates social, cultural, economic governance, even as Bhutan continues to weather a global pandemic and prepares for a lower middle income status in 2023. Civil society is the place where citizens learn to outgrow a “recipient” mentality, dependent on development aid and services. CSOs and civic spaces give citizens room to experiment with citizenship participation.

Citizens can be given more opportunities to sit on boards and committees, to provide guidance to organisations (including government agencies), volunteer, partner and collaborate. This will make public participation more inclusive and effective. In doing so, people can develop a sense of agency and confidence in taking on the responsibilities of taking care of their own needs and associating with shared interests.

The pandemic has shown Bhutan the necessity to forge partnerships across government, civil society and the private sector. Civil society stakeholders themselves must drop their hesitation to become a part of the partnership for change.

There are 52 registered CSOs (both public benefit and mutual benefit organisations). This translates to 1 CSO for every 14,541 populace. Civic space is dynamic; it is dependent on the interests and ability of citizens to come together to address felt needs. This dynamism is central to the growth of a democratic culture.

Media

Media is a strong influence on, and an indicator of democratic culture. It is a tool for free speech and participation and for learning citizenship values.

The media presence in Bhutan has expanded with democracy, and Bhutan's free speech index has been improving incrementally in recent years. The presence of more newspapers, TV channels, social media, blogs and social influencers shows a relatively robust media presence.

Social media is now a way of life and, as with global trends, Bhutanese are learning to deal with misinformation and disinformation. The pandemic saw a wave of fake news and hate speech that is rubbing off on a populace embracing the freedoms of the social media world.

People use social media to hold government agencies, and individuals accountable. Recent postings of bullying and other social ills go viral in a small society. Public discourse on social media is pathbreaking, and opening up society. The rough and tumble remarks, and sometimes nasty speech, along with anonymous postings indicate a need to learn civility in free speech.

“ Without anonymity on social media, we will not have a voice. No one will speak up especially with regard to politics,” said an academic who felt that people generally lack confidence in giving constructive feedback in the absence of a participatory culture.

News literacy is an essential skill. Several CSOs conduct variations of media literacy programmes in schools, communities, among volunteers, local leaders and teachers. This can be built into the curricula of schools, colleges, even the civil service and various institutions.

Young and old alike are changing their sleep patterns to take advantage of the cheaper post-midnight data packages that telephone companies offer, and much of this data is spent chasing goods, games and entertainment. Are Bhutanese being groomed to be consumers rather than citizens? Urban youth are more familiar with K-pop stars than with what the future economy or job market in Bhutan is likely to need. How will Bhutan handle post pandemic times? Will there be jobs after lockdown?

Schools can encourage a more balanced media diet, leading youth to grow with an interest in news, current affairs, and politics. Teachers at a news literacy workshop in January said that teenagers generally do not read the newspapers or watch broadcast news. Some may refer to the news online

but their media use is more for socialisation and entertainment. This trend needs attention. Schools can work in partnership with parents to promote interest in Bhutanese and global news; encourage an interest in seeking verified information on how the government functions, and to use social media to provide feedback to public institutions.

News reports, overall, are urban-centric, focusing on political elites, corruption, and crime. Coverage can be expanded to shine a light on what works, to focus on participatory citizens, and how decisions are becoming more inclusive. News media can continue to prioritise space for people to express their opinions openly. To improve civic participation, Bhutan's schools, communities and media can do more to promote critical thinking, respect for diverse opinions, and free and open inquiry.

Narratives for Democratic Culture

There is a small but growing wave of short films, music videos, and publications on democracy that deserves attention and support. These are Bhutan narratives that help foster interest and understanding of democracy. They can model a democracy that is inclusive and civil. A range of children's books, graphic novels, TV documentaries and publications can help popularise democratic values and principles, and build the imagination of the Bhutanese citizen. Humour can help defray the sensitivities of a small society still uncomfortable with and unused to public discourse on politics.

In a small country heavily influenced by stories from other cultures (including the global polarising democratic culture), it is important that Bhutan invests support in popularising Bhutanese stories on democracy and citizen participation.

Conclusion

The current war in Europe and the national efforts to contain the COVID pandemic are reminders that democracy, and the deepening of a spirit of democracy, is always a work in progress.

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