

Preface

Local Government – Critical to Democratic Governance

Article 22 of the Constitution of Bhutan lays out the perspective for local governance: “Power and authority shall be decentralised and devolved to elected local governments to facilitate the direct participation of the people in the development and management of their own social, economic and environmental well-being.”

Around the mid-20th century, the Bhutanese Monarchy transformed rule from the Royal Court into a structured modern government. From 1981, with the establishment of Dzongkhag Yargye Tshogdu (district development committees), authority was strategically decentralised from the centre to the 20 dzongkhags (districts). With the introduction of parliamentary democracy in 2008, administrative power and authority was further devolved to 202 local governments with the Constitution providing the legal instruments for the structures and institutions.

Local government was given a major lift when His Majesty the King reminded the gups (locally elected leaders of a county), as well as the Bhutanese population, in October, 2016, that local government is not the lowest level of government as it is sometimes misconceived. On the contrary it is the most important level of government because local leaders are the nearest and closest level of government to the people.

Today, the gups who were previously appointed by the dzongda (head of the district administration), receive the dhar (ceremonial scarf) from His Majesty the King as they negotiate a new era in Bhutanese politics. The status of local government was given a further boost when His Majesty the King awarded the special kabney (scarf) and patang (sword) to the chairpersons of the dzongkhag tshogdus (district council). This not only strengthens the process of decentralisation but emphasises the important role that the local government plays in nation building.

In the attempt to refine local governance, laws and regulations are being modified. Political debate and public discourse range from academic qualifications of candidates and electoral procedures to political corruption

and the values of democracy. In the past the only literate local leaders were retired monks. Today, there are high school and university graduates and “functionally literate” village leaders, meaning people who can read and write.

The profile of local politics is changing. One gup, who remembers being paid Nu. 450 a month when he began his career, is getting more than Nu. 30,000 today. Given the concerns about the professional capacity of local functionaries, there are programmes to train the gewog and village elected leaders, clerks and accountants, dzongkhag staff in professional administrative skills.

Local governance now includes city living. Urbanisation renders the process far more complex as rapid urban drift changes the demography of Bhutanese communities. As villages aspire to grow into towns – not bigger than communities that are considered villages in many countries – municipal governance calls for a new administrative culture.

This issue of The Druk Journal will look at local governance issues in both the rural and urban situation.

It is no surprise that “local governance” straddles a triangle of politicians, civil servants, and community leaders. Previously neglected because of the remoteness of the rural populace, the local administrative system grapples with the confusion of change. As the traditional village function is now complicated by political power play the MPs, gups, and local officials struggle to identify their status and their responsibilities.

Governance means new challenges like motor vehicle traffic, housing and urban poverty, waste management, and other pressures as municipalities deal with a population demanding more sophisticated services and systems. The electoral process in thromdes proves to be a bigger dilemma. The law allows just a fraction of the resident population to vote, leaving the majority helpless and frustrated with urban governance even as 70 percent of the population are expected to live in cities. How can Bhutan be more inclusive in municipal governance?

Local governments, on the geographic fringes of the democratic structure, are indispensable avenues for the rural population to participate in

development and change. In fact, the success of democracy will be determined to a large extent by the success of local governments.

This issue of The Druk Journal discusses local governance in three broad perspectives. The first section, Decentralised Governance, emphasises the importance of local government in Bhutan's democratic structure. In the second section, Engaging the Community, several writers look at the importance of the active participation of people in all aspects of local government, from planning to implementation, and ownership of public services, facilities, and assets. The contributors in the last section, Perspectives on Local Government, reflect on their personal experiences, views, and observations on the functioning of local government in Bhutan.