

Thoughts on the Bhutanese Local Governance System

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As a scholar with years of experience in several gewogs (counties) and chiwogs (unit of counties), I wish to share my perspective on local governance in Bhutan. I have not conducted formal research on this topic. I visited several gewogs and chiwogs as part of my assignments for donor-assisted projects and university student study tours, which enabled me to gain first-hand information on the Bhutanese local governance system, its issues and challenges.

Compared with the Japanese system, Bhutan is unique in the following aspects: Electoral eligibility is customarily limited to local residents; the election of tshogpas (elected leaders of chiwogs) is based on settlement; and the nature of the Bhutanese State, that can be ascertained by the way State institutions are organised and legitimatised¹. This essay also looks at Japanese municipalities to compare with gewogs to elucidate these attributes. I do not specifically refer to thromdes (towns) as they are unfamiliar to me, although this essay may have some relevance.

Japan has a similar three-tier system that comprises the national government, prefectures, and municipalities. Municipalities are the administrative units closest to voters and are categorised into cities, towns, and villages. As in Bhutan, heads of cities, towns and villages are directly elected by the constituencies, and are called mayors in Japan. In addition, each city, town or village has its own assembly, consisting of members who are also directly elected.

Unlike gewog tshogdus (assemblies), the electoral district for Japanese municipal assembly members is the entire area of a city, town or village (although separate electoral districts can exceptionally be set up by ordinance). This contrasts with the Bhutanese system, which divides gewogs into area-based constituencies to elect tshogpas (who serve as assembly members of gewog tshogdus). The electoral constituency of a

¹ Swilling, M. 2020: *The age of sustainability: Just transitions in a complex age*. Routledge, p. 200.

tshogpa corresponds to one or more chiwogs, which often overlap with a cluster of houses where the residents see each other on a daily basis. In this respect, tshogpas are well positioned to represent their local communities. Another major difference pertains to whether the right to hold office is limited to local residents. Under the Japanese system, “parachute candidates” can participate in the elections of mayors and assembly members. According to the law, candidates must have lived in their constituencies for at least three months. This leaves room for people with little or no ties to the constituencies to transfer their residence records just three months before the qualifying date.

Political parties are allowed to endorse, recommend, or support candidates. The rationale behind these “lax” rules is that they enable qualified candidates to come forward, and pave the way for voting based on policy packages rather than personal considerations.

In reality, party involvement is known to facilitate post-election horse-trading between local and national level politicians, rather than their and voters’ rational behaviours. In contrast, in Bhutan, candidates for gups (elected leaders of gewogs) and tshogpas cannot be associated with parties. Moreover, the vast majority of them reside in their constituencies.

In Japan, party-affiliated groups may organise votes and influence election outcomes. This does not mean that local governments can be fully captured by national politics. Even in localities where mayors seek to promote particular parties’ political objectives, assemblies serve as checks on executive power.

Moreover, according to a study, the percentage of city mayors who distanced themselves from political parties was only 30 percent in the 1980s, but it rose to more than half in the 2000s.² Independent mayors engage in lobbying at the central level as well as the enactment of ordinances; these actions are taken to counter the central government’s policy that clashes with local sentiment.

At the same time, the reverse can occur in localities where mayors hold office with the endorsement, recommendation, or support of the ruling

² Hirano, J. 2012: ‘The transformation of mayors’ career histories and partisanship (Shichou no Syokureki/Touhasei no Henyou)’, *Annual Report of Administrative Research (Nenpou Gyousei Kenkyu)* 47, pp. 90–91. (in Japanese)

party. In the latter case, the local “representatives” tend to fail to genuinely articulate local interests.

Against this background, the Bhutanese local governance system is better designed to reflect local “consensus” regarding whom the majority choose to represent their gewogs or chiwogs. Firstly, no “parachute candidates” are allowed to run in local elections. All candidates for gups and tshogpas I came across in Bhutan resided in their constituencies, which I believe is also the case in the vast majority of other localities.

Secondly, no political parties are involved in local elections and this facilitates voters to decide which candidate is more likely to meet their expectations.

The flip side is that the Bhutanese system is more liable to be determined by voter-based power dynamics, for better or worse. Like anywhere else, electoral politics entails give-and-take between voters and elected officials.

Nevertheless, I have noted that some gups paid attention to every chiwog fairly and equitably, while others seemed to prefer certain chiwogs where they had garnered larger votes. Whether the incumbent gup falls under the former or latter category does not only matter because people’s livelihoods are affected by the distribution of gewogs’ budgets, but because His Majesty’s vision of “a just and harmonious society” is also at stake.

A society guided by “private interests” alone is liable to bring about unhappiness, to use the terminology of political theory.³ It is crucial to curb “private interests” competing with each other, in favour of “the public interest”, which ultimately benefits every member.

Ideally speaking, local governments should not lapse into a battleground for “private interests”, but serve as “a deliberative assembly with one interest, that of the whole”, to paraphrase Edmund Burke’s famous speech to the electors of Bristol, England, in 1774. “The public interest” is not a collection of “private interests” as the latter in and of themselves do not necessarily add up to the welfare of the whole. “The public interest” is a collective entity that is of interest to everyone.

³ This paragraph was written with reference to *Political Theory: An Introduction* (3rd edition, 2004, p. 233, pp. 240–245).

Whether it is plausible to establish an institutional mechanism conducive to “the public interest” tends to be seen as a moot point.

As for the Bhutanese local governance system, we can place our hope in the nature of the State. The Bhutanese State provides national visions like Gross National Happiness (GNH), which signifies “the public interest” and is accordingly enshrined in the Constitution as the overarching principle of the country’s governance. GNH is “a compass towards a just and harmonious society”, to borrow the expression from the title of the 2015 GNH survey report. Bhutanese State institutions are tasked with promoting GNH and are, therefore, organised and legitimised along the vision of “a just and harmonious society”.

In line with the attributes of the State, I have observed dzongdas (district governors appointed by the central government) or their representatives helping solve local issues at times. This is a part of their mandate to enhance the well-being of the people.

The dzongdas or their representatives arrange for community consultations to assist local representatives and residents to settle intra-gewog issues, or those arising from conflicts with outsiders. I noted that every effort was made to reconcile the differences in opinions and reach a good-faith solution.

However in Japan, such an institutional mechanism is absent, and the difference between the two systems can be attributed to the nature of the State. The Japanese State is organised and legitimised along liberal and pluralist creeds which see politics in terms of competition between different groups with different interests.

This does not mean that no general agreement exists in Japanese politics as to what broad goals the State should aspire for. It is widely considered that unbridgeable differences in opinions exist regarding how those goals are to be attained, and that decisions should be determined in ways to satisfy “the greatest number” of the constituency.

In contrast, the local governance system in Bhutan benefits from GNH, embodying “the public interest” that all State institutions coalesce around the goal of building “a just and harmonious society”. Moreover,

the Bhutanese system has the comparative advantage of reflecting local “consensus”. It then follows that local governance can potentially be made to achieve better results if and when “a just and harmonious consensus” is forged at the gewog level. Equal and transparent consideration is given to the needs and aspirations of every segment of the gewog, in line with the vision of “a just and harmonious society”.

However, according to a detailed study of the unfolding of GNH⁴, locally elected representatives do not prioritise GNH. This is mainly because of the lack of a working modality that facilitates them to work towards GNH outcomes.

The government introduced the Local Development Planning Manual (LDPM) in 2009.⁵ The LDPM details the procedures for gewogs to conduct planning in a participatory and objective manner. However, ways to attain another objective of the manual, namely strengthening linkages between gewog plans and the country’s overarching vision of GNH, still need to be elucidated.

In this respect, it is plausible to emulate, at the gewog level, the GNH screening tool that has been used at the central level to ensure every government policy adheres to key GNH concerns.⁶

All relevant dimensions of GNH are examined against a checklist that includes GNH determinants, such as “equity”, “support”, “rights”, “culture”, “discrimination”, and “values”, to assess the potential effects of a draft policy. A minimum of 15 participants are required to be involved in this exercise, from the proponent agency, the secretariat of the Gross National Happiness Commission (the apex body of the government for GNH promotion), and other organisations concerned.

A similar tool can possibly be incorporated into LDPM to apply GNH principles more rigorously at the gewog level. This should help institute “a just and harmonious working modality” which ensures that more equal and transparent consideration is given to every segment of the gewog.

⁴ Schroeder, K. 2018: *Politics of Gross National Happiness: Governance and development in Bhutan*. Palgrave Macmillan.

⁵ LDPM, the Local Development Planning Manual, was thereafter revised in 2014 and 2021.

⁶ This idea is drawn from the suggestion made in the above study to “bridge the image of a GNH state with the practices of governance actors on the ground” (Schroeder, 2018, p.143).

In the words of the author of the above study, this should serve to usher in “a collaborative process where potentially competing interests engage with one another to reach an agreement ... in a manner that channels their interests towards the achievement of GNH”.⁷

For this purpose, civil servants posted at gewog offices, who also serve as non-voting members of gewog tshogdus, in addition to dzongkhag-level (district-level) civil servants, can be mobilised to assist in the process, although this may require the government to allocate a larger budget and more personnel.

Despite a general shift from State-centric to societal-centric governance, I believe that the Bhutanese State remains the key actor as a monitor and coordinator of local governance. This is because of the manner in which State institutions are organised and legitimised in Bhutan.

The nature of the Bhutanese State contrasts with that of the Japanese State; the latter does not play a proactive role in articulating an overarching principle of governance for the well-being of the entire nation.

In summary, the local governance system in Bhutan is endowed with GNH. The vision can potentially help usher in “a collaborative process” whereby various stakeholders work together to promote “a just and harmonious society”. The prospects for realising this potential are high, given that the Bhutanese system works according to voter-based dynamics. Once an institutional mechanism is in place for nurturing a gewog-wide consensus to strive for GNH outcomes, I believe that local governance will be further upgraded as a platform for promoting the people’s well-being.

⁷ Schroeder, 2018, p. 44.