

Empowering Bhutanese Democracy: A Journey of Growth and Evolution

Election Commission of Bhutan

Bhutan's evolutionary path to democracy has been unique, with the institution of Monarchy as the agent of change. The concept of democracy in Bhutan has been nurtured with the guidance and wisdom of our Monarchs. Following the first parliamentary elections in 2008, there have been several developments have taken place in the areas of electoral process and participation of citizens.

Going forward, Bhutan has been blessed with the opportunity to continuously learn from the experiences of other democracies around the world and not repeat their mistakes. Keeping this in mind, Bhutan must remain focused and endeavour to maintain a robust electoral process, by taking small steps, one at a time, and aspire to succeed and reach the desired destination.

In this article, we focus on the Election Commission of Bhutan's role, examining its successes, challenges, and strategies for the future.

The success of the elections during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the by-elections in the Chhoekhor-Tang, Monggar and Nganglam NA (National Assembly) demkhongs (constituency) which were held in November, 2020 and June 2021, is a shining testimony to our achievements.

In 2021, the three thromde elections were conducted when the transmission of COVID-19 virus was at its peak. In the thromde elections of Gelephu and Phuentsholing, election officials had to put in place stringent COVID-19 protocols and facilitate door-to-door voting to prevent transmission of the disease and ensure optimum voter turnout. This was followed by the LG (Local Government) elections in 205 gewogs in December 2021.

It is noteworthy to highlight here that this resounding success of elections during the COVID-19 pandemic was made possible by putting in place a comprehensive strategy that the ECB developed during the height of

the pandemic. The implementation plan to conduct elections in the three thromdes and 205 gewogs had the following salient features:

Paper Ballot Facilitation Booths (PFBF) allowed voters in different dzongkhags to cast their votes at the places of their residence rather than having to travel to their constituencies and risk COVID-19 infections.

Mobile Voting Booths (MVB) offered voters residing in the thromdes (towns) of Gelephu and Phuentsholing opportunities to vote from their doorsteps. The MVB also helped vulnerable senior citizens and people with disabilities (PWDs) to vote from their homes without risking COVID-19 infections.

Special voting arrangements for seasonal migratory voters, such as highlanders from Gasa, Haa, and Trashigang, were put in place at their winter pasture lands.

With postal ballot services paralysed during the pandemic, the ECB collected ballots at district border points, in compliance with stringent COVID-19 protocols.

With the support of security personnel and desuups, the ECB was able to enforce strict COVID-19 protocols at designated polling stations to prevent local transmission of the virus.

While elections were postponed in many countries, the ECB was inspired by the selfless and able leadership of His Majesty the King in Bhutan's exemplary handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. His Majesty the King led from the front, and instilled in all of us the much-required confidence to take bold steps and proceed with the conduct of LG elections amidst the pandemic. The grit and determination demonstrated by His Majesty the King generated exceptional motivation, enabling the ECB to achieve the highest-ever voter turnout of 68.42 percent in the history of LG elections. A remarkable achievement during the LG elections is the fact that not a single case of COVID-19 infections in the country has been attributed to the conduct of elections.

Civic and Voter Education (C&VE)

The ECB's primary mandate is to conduct elections in a free, fair, and transparent manner. For this reason, the ECB accords the highest priority to C&VE. During every election cycle, the ECB devotes much of its resources to exhaustive training for dzongkhag election officials so that they can carry out effective sensitisation and awareness programmes for voters/citizens of their rights, responsibilities, and duties at various levels of the community.

With elections to be held soon, it is critical that we emphasise the need to create greater awareness of party manifestos and campaign pledges made by political parties and candidates. The ECB is also collaborating with the Anti-Corruption Commission to create widespread awareness of the prevention of electoral corruption.

The ECB always encourages voters to, firstly, be fully informed about candidates, issues, the electoral process, election schedule, and polling locations. Secondly, voters are advised to thoroughly assess electoral information from multiple sources - the mainstream media, social media platforms, campaign materials, or community-based sources. Thirdly, voters are also encouraged to engage in meaningful discourse with fellow citizens on political issues within one's community, help spread knowledge, and foster a better understanding of different perspectives.

Above all, it is the endeavour of the ECB to enable voters to make informed choices based on their values and priorities rather than voting along party lines or making decisions solely based on emotion, family connection, ethnicity, religion, and region. Citizens must vote for the most able candidates and the best party that can lead our country into the future.

Cost of Elections

Given Bhutan's geography and difficult mountainous terrain, the cost of elections has always been very high. Over the years, every successive Commission has made consistent efforts to reduce this cost. Applying stringent austerity measures and judicious planning, the ECB was able to save Nu 162 million during the LG elections, 2021, and Nu 74.411 million

during the NC elections, 2023, substantial savings for the government.¹

Without compromising the quality of elections, some noteworthy measures adopted to substantially reduce costs were the suspension of printing voter photo identity cards (VPIC), stopping the e-roll copies for candidates, reducing the number of polling stations from 866 to 809, reducing office equipment such as computers, laptops, colour printers and photocopiers, printing of e-roll and postal ballots in black & white and rationalisation of the number of election and polling officials from 4,525 in 2018 to 3,484 in 2023.

Going forward, the ECB will be collaborating with the Government Technology (Gov-Tech) Agency to explore online voting and the use of technology to enhance efficiency and reduce the overall cost of elections in the future.

Learning from Experience Programme (LEP)

The LEP is an institutionalised post-mortem exercise instituted since the inception of the ECB, which has helped it to learn from every election and introduce meaningful changes and improvements in every successive election. Some of the notable achievements are highlighted below:

The body of 63 rules & regulations, guidelines, handbooks and strategies has been reviewed and revised after every election to improve the electoral process. A number of standard operating procedures (SOPs) have been developed and implemented.

On the technology front, Returning Officers' (RO) Dashboard and Electoral Roll Search System (ERSS) have been developed and implemented for scrutiny of candidates' nomination documents and voter management at the polling stations.

Common Forum (CF) campaigning was initiated during the 2013 NA elections for voters' convenience and to facilitate attendance of all party/candidate campaign meetings at a common venue.

¹ A financial statement for the NC Elections, 2024 maintained by the Election Commission of Bhutan

A web-based Postal Ballot Registration System has been put in place to ensure efficiency and accuracy in the registration process, in keeping with eligibility criteria.

Door-to-door campaigning by political parties and candidates has been discontinued because of concerns expressed by all stakeholders, and replaced by smaller group meetings.

Power of Social Media

Social media has become a powerful, indispensable tool for making connections with voters and sharing electoral information and messages. Social media platforms offer excellent opportunities to engage with the electorates. Given the interactive nature and wider reach, they help shape public opinion efficiently and at minimum costs.

With growing access and popularity of social media, it is certain that the ECB will face increasing challenges from social media-based election disputes, allegations, and counter-allegations rooted in fake news, misinformation, and disinformation. This could result in the emergence of social media-based vote bank politics based on religion, region and ethnicity, which could prove detrimental to the principles of free and fair elections.

These fears are further compounded by the prospects that the rapid development of AI could bring into play social media based political campaigning and vote bank politics. These emerging concerns need immediate attention to ensure that the power of social media platforms are not exploited to sow the seeds of communal disharmony for political gains and winning elections.

Challenges

Every successive election faces bigger challenges and complexities. The following are some critical challenges that the 3rd Commission will focus on in the 4th NA elections, 2023-24.

Reducing the cost of elections: The ECB will closely collaborate with the Government Technology (Gov-Tech) Agency to develop a robust online voting system for Bhutan. A conceptual framework has already been

prepared and cyber security will remain the priority.

Going fully digital: The digital roadmap is already in place and its implementation will commence soon after the NA elections, 2023-24. While the digital platforms are already being operated, preliminary groundwork has also been completed for strengthening institutional memory through digital archiving and paperless office management. Going forward, the ECB must take full advantage of the National Digital Identity (NDI) resources and collaborate with GovTech Agency.

Resource constraints: The ECB is funded by the government and does not have access to project funds like many other entities. The ECB needs the necessary resources to develop in-house capacity and domain expertise for effective Civic and Voter Education during the non-election period. In addition to RGoB funding for human resource development, ECB employees must be given access to scholarships offered through bilateral and multilateral sources like other government employees.

State funding for parliamentary elections: For the foreseeable future, it may be necessary to maintain state funding for parliamentary elections in keeping with the electoral laws to safeguard a level playing field for all candidates. Until Bhutan's democratic parliamentary system has developed and matured, it may be necessary to maintain the current State funding for NC and NA elections.

Raising the bar for public debates and evaluation of party manifestos and campaign pledges: The Rules on Elections Conduct in the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2022, instituted to improve the inherent weaknesses, requires that an Independent Evaluation Committee (IEC) be put in place to evaluate the manifestos and campaign pledges of political parties. The work of the IEC will help ensure that the manifestos and pledges are not unreasonable and unrealistic. In the same spirit, given the importance of the public debates, the ECB has been collaborating with the BBS and making concerted efforts to raise the bar for the public debates.

Misuse of social media: The adverse impacts of fake news in social media has already become a major challenge for our society, particularly during elections. The potential for misuse of AI to manipulate information and video clips for political mileage is also a grave concern. Timely and

collective collaboration among all key stakeholders will be vital to address these emerging challenges in the social media. Most importantly, the ECB must work closely with the Gov-Tech Agency and BICMA to keep pace with the rapidly evolving technological sector and put in place the necessary regulatory framework as and when necessary. It would also be a top priority for the ECB to develop robust in-house capacity among its employees to deal with these grave challenges.

Election in emergencies: While the future of elections in Bhutan lies in the use of technology, it is important to ensure that, as part of the disaster preparedness strategy, an alternative voting option for emergencies is in place. As a stand-by measure, the ECB has ballot boxes ready in the dzongkhags for paper ballot voting in the event of unforeseen emergencies.

One Election Cycle

Election cycles not only involve very high costs but are also seen as extremely burdensome for the voters who have to participate multiple times within the election cycle of five years. The experience of other countries has proven that multiple elections have an adverse impact on governance whenever the focus shifts to the election season. The election cycles also create huge pressure on the dzongkhag administrations and the security forces, with multiple engagements in election duties. These are indeed compelling reasons to explore the possibility of holding the Local Government (LG), National Council (NC) and National Assembly (NA) elections on the same day under one election cycle.

External Cooperation

The ECB maintains close cooperation with election management bodies in the region, sharing experiences and challenges and exchanging ideas in the field of electoral administration. It has been a member of the Forum of Election Management Bodies of South Asia (FEMBoSA) since its establishment in 2010, and took over the chairmanship in 2021, successfully conducting two rounds of virtual interactive sessions among the FEMBoSA member countries.

The ECB is also an associate member of the Association of Asian Election Authorities (AAEA) as well as the Association of World Election Bodies (A-WEB) which provide opportunities for cooperation in the field of election and democracy, electoral administration and management, and election observation missions in other countries.

Based on the close relations between the Election Commission of Bhutan and the Election Commission of India (ECI), an ECI delegation, led by the Chief Election Commissioner of India, visited Bhutan in April 2023. It enabled the two sides to leverage strengths, expertise, and resources, benefiting the two election management bodies.

Contribution of Successive Commissions

The successful conduct of the first parliamentary election set a benchmark for successive elections. The first Election Commission of Bhutan not only prepared the Bhutanese citizenry for the historic parliamentary elections of 2008, but also put in place a massive compendium of 66 electoral laws. Each successive Commission has been able to build on the achievements of the past and take the electoral process forward. Henceforth, the ECB needs to work towards a robust electoral system best suited to the country's needs, based on its population dynamics, economy, geography, connectivity, technological capacity, expertise, and digital literacy of the voters. Such an endeavour would require the support of all the stakeholders including the government of the day, political parties, and the general public.

Participation of Women and PWDs in elections.

In all the elections conducted in Bhutan since 2008, there has been a persistent pattern of low participation of female candidates. During the inaugural local government (LG) election in 2011, only 236 out of 2,503 women came forward to contest. There was an increase in 2016, with 553 female candidates out of a total of 2,939 contestants. However, in 2021, the number of women candidates dropped to 179 out of 1,287 contestants.

A similar trend can be observed in the National Council (NC) elections, with the participation of six female candidates out of 52 in 2008, five out of 67 in 2013, six out of 127 in 2018, and five out of 89 in 2023. As for LG elections, women's representation stood at 8.62 percent in 2011, 15.84

percent in 2016 and 12.21 percent in 2021, lower than the global average of 26.7 percent as well as the regional average (21.3 percent)² of women in parliament.

The concern about issues of inadequate representation of women in Bhutanese politics has been raised by many stakeholders. Generally, challenges that women face in effective political participation emanate from gender stereotyping, negative cultural perceptions and misplaced perceptions about women in leadership, and the difficulty faced by women in maintaining a balance between family and public life.

Misperceptions about lack of political skills and confidence also appear to be prevalent.³ In order to break these barriers and misperceptions, the ECB has been collaborating with key stakeholders and holding training, workshops and seminars to create greater awareness on the need to promote participation of women in the electoral process.

The ECB, positioning itself as the neutral agency, creates a level playing field for all candidates, irrespective of their gender and status. The ECB is of the view that it needs to work closely with women organisations to take this agenda forward. Additionally, it is also crucial for political parties and communities to facilitate and promote the participation of women in the electoral process.

As for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), their participation in elections has been gradually improving, with more PWDs keen to take part. The issuance of a Functional Literacy Test (FLT) Certificate to five PWDs prior to the 2021 LG elections has been a step forward in the right direction as these FLT holders are now eligible to contest.

In its effort to facilitate the participation of PWDs in elections, the ECB has been constantly reminding the dzongkhags to install PWD-friendly infrastructure in public structures being constructed.

² Global and regional averages of women in national parliaments published by Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU), 1st September 2023

³ Women political participation research survey by ECB

Conclusion

The ECB has conducted three parliamentary elections, three local government elections, numerous bye-elections and the recently concluded NC elections of April 2023. As democracy has progressed, so has the maturity of voters in understanding the essence of democracy and elections, including their perceived complexities and challenges.

While the high voter turnout at the outset of the country's democratic transition could be attributed to the initial euphoria of the first parliamentary elections, today's trends could be viewed as the growing maturity of voters in electoral matters and their ability to make informed decisions in electing political parties and candidates.

Of all the elections conducted so far, the 3rd LG elections have been the most difficult. The elections stretched over the entire year in 2021, conducted in the face of extreme challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been the most successful election with the highest voter turnout, and without a single case of COVID-19 infection being attributed to elections. In Bhutan's voyage towards democracy, Their Majesties the Kings of Bhutan have played a crucial role, guiding the nation's transition into a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy. Even amidst the complex challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, His Majesty the King led from the front, effectively overcoming the disease.

There are critical areas that demand the careful attention of the ECB in the conduct of elections. Most notable among them are the need to address the high cost of elections, harness technology for secure and reliable online voting, promote active participation of women and persons with disabilities in the political arena, educate youth to prepare for their impending responsibilities by strengthening democracy education and engagement in schools and tertiary institutions, and mobilise the financial resources for civic and voter education programmes during the non-election period.

These are aimed at preparing voters of the future and conducting research on electoral subjects crucial for the evolution of Bhutan's democracy. Equally important will be the ECB's ability to mobilise funding support that is commensurate with its independence over HR and finance, particularly in areas of capacity development, focusing on the long-term professional

growth of its employees. This is vital to ensure that the ECB can carry out its duties with professionalism, maturity, and credibility.

The ECB, as the gatekeeper for the conduct of elections in the Kingdom, will remain at all times fully committed to pursuing our mandate with the highest integrity and dedication. In doing so, just as we need two hands to clap, we seek the unconditional support of all stakeholders, especially the political parties and all the aspiring candidates to enable the ECB to hold free, fair, and transparent elections.

References:

Study of the Determinants of Voter's Choice and Women's Participation in Elective Offices in the Kingdom of Bhutan . (2014, November). www.ecb.bt; Election Commission of Bhutan. <https://www.ecb.bt/rnp/women.pdf>

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