

Perception of Corruption in the Bhutanese Electoral System

Anti-Corruption Commission

Introduction

Public perception of corruption plays a pivotal role in shaping electoral choices, and in the overall health of a democracy. The presence of corruption threatens the principles of democracy by setting aside norms of political equality and political competition, distorting the mechanisms by which citizens elect and hold representatives accountable, and reducing the representatives' incentives to act in the interests of their voters.¹

Corruption also corrodes a government's function as a resource allocator by denying citizens services to which they are entitled to. As a result, the presence of corruption leads to general cynicism, distrust and voter apathy, which can decrease voter turnout.

In the case of Bhutan, Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index² of 2022 ranked Bhutan as the 25th least corrupt country in the world, with a score of 68 out of 100, which has remained the same since 2018. Similarly, Bhutan has been consistently placed sixth in the Asia and Pacific Region for the last 10 years.

At the national level, the National Integrity Assessment (NIA)³ score has seen a progressive trend, with the current NIA 2022 score of 8.01 out of 10. In the case of NIA 2022, one of the indexes used to measure national integrity is the Parliamentary Integrity Index (PII) which is newly developed. The PII score in the NIA 2022 stands at 6.90, which is low compared with the national score.

This paper looks at corruption in the Bhutanese electoral system, based on the Parliamentary Integrity Index of NIA 2022. The paper uses

1 Dahlberg, Stefan, and Maria Solevid. 2016. "Does Corruption Suppress Voter Turnout?" *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties* 26 (4): 489–510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2016.1223677>

2 <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/bhutan>

3 Anti-Corruption Commission. 2023. "National Integrity Assessment 2022."

data from NIA 2022, involving 1,499 PII respondents, comprising 48 parliamentarians (including elected members of the National Assembly and National Council) and 1,451 citizens (voters). Similarly, this paper also draws on the significance of voters' perceptions from the literature, and explores their implications for the democratic processes. Further, the analysis is triangulated using the National Corruption Barometer Survey (NCBS) reports for 2020 and 2023.

This article aims to

- Provide an overview of the Parliamentary Integrity Index (PII) assessed as part of the NIA 2022.
- Explore the significance of voters' corruption perceptions regarding parliamentarians in democratic processes, and
- Analyse key findings and trends in the data related to voters' perceptions of corruption among parliamentarians.

Methodology

The evaluation of PII included a total of 731 and 720 respondents who were voters or constituents of the National Assembly of Bhutan (NAB) and the National Council of Bhutan (NCB), respectively. The respondents were selected from the two randomly selected chiwogs (cluster of villages) per constituency, from a total of 47 constituencies of the NAB. The interviews were conducted in person and virtually. Computer-assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) was used to collect data from the 72 parliamentarians. Only 48 parliamentarians responded to the questionnaire - 29 NA members and 19 NC members.

The PII as Part of NIA 2022

The National Integrity Assessment (NIA), since its adoption in 2009 by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) from the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission (ACRC), South Korea, is the only longitudinal study that the ACC conducts. Generally, the NIA is an assessment of whether, in an agency, a public official follows standard procedures in providing services fairly and transparently. It tries to assess the perception and experience of service providers and service users in terms of transparency, accountability, and corruption. Additionally, it also assesses the agency in

terms of integrity culture, work integrity, and ethical leadership practices. The NIA is conducted once every three years and refined to best fit the context.

The concept of the Parliamentarians' Integrity Index (PII) came to light when the 4th National Integrity Assessment (NIA 2019) report was presented to the members of the National Assembly and National Council in 2021. The members stressed the significance of parliamentarians' role in fighting corruption and promoting integrity through their functions. It was suggested that the ACC should include elected leaders, including the members of Parliament, and local government in future assessments.

The Parliamentarian Integrity Index (PII) is a measure of how well-integrated parliamentarians are in the eyes of both their constituents and themselves. It involves representativeness, oversight, legislative transparency, accountability, integrity, and corruption, from the perspectives of citizens and parliamentarians themselves.

The Importance of Voter Perception

Corruption can weaken democratic institutions and reduce citizens' sense of civic duty to vote, which can lead to lower voter participation, and weakening of democratic institutions. Some studies⁴ have shown a weak correlation between perceived corruption and civic duty to vote, or electoral turnout. The public perceives corruption as a societal issue, where different forms of corruption are normalised in some societies. This makes it difficult to cast out incumbents based solely on corruption.

In contrast, the National Council election on August 20, 2023, noted the highest voter turnout in 15 years. Out of 485,811 eligible voters, nearly 55 percent participated in the election. In the first election in 2008, it was 53 percent; in 2013, it was 45.17 percent; and in 2018, it was 54.3 percent. The highest voter turnout can be associated with the perception of low corruption, as indicated by the weak correlation between corruption and voter turnout, but other factors cannot be ruled out.

⁴ Alejandro Ecker, Konstantin Glinitzer, and Thomas M. Meyer, "Corruption Performance Voting and the Electoral Context," *European Political Science Review* 8, no. 3 (February 26, 2015): 333–54, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1755773915000053>.

Factors such as economic growth also plays an important role. A study⁵ reveals that economic growth influences the correlation between political corruption, economic performance, and electoral outcomes. In good economic conditions, corruption is a minor issue, while in the least developed economic conditions, corruption becomes a decisive factor in electoral outcomes.

Similarly, considering Bhutan as a developing country with low economic growth, the influence of corruption on electoral outcomes can be huge. So far, no political party has been re-elected as a government in Bhutan. There are cases where some have been re-elected, but drawing from the most recent national election, only two of the 10 incumbents were re-elected. This gives a hint as to where the perception of corruption may sprout. It could be either due to corrupt practices during the election period or the result of corrupt practices during the tenure. However, there are also other reasons reported by the newspaper Kuensel, such as “sympathy votes”, which could have mattered.

Analysis of the Data

Parliamentarians’ involvement in any corrupt activity has the potential to weaken their ability to perform their legislative function and their ability to combat it, by giving party supporters and lobbyists an unfair edge. The battle against corruption by parliamentarians can advance good governance by establishing effective parliamentary committees and oversight mechanisms. Furthermore, as the representatives of the people, parliamentarians must prevent and condemn corrupt behaviour.

According to NIA 2022⁶, a score of 9.09 on the corruption component indicates an outstanding level of integrity. This score indicates a low prevalence of experienced corruption and a low involvement of parliamentarians in corrupt practices. It was found that 99 percent of the respondents said they had never given cash, kind, or services (and also entertainment or other gratifications) to anyone to gain voter support, as opposed to one percent who said they had.

5 Fernando Feitosa, “Theoretically, Yes, but Also Empirically? How the Corruption-Turnout Link Is Marginally Explained by Civic Duty to Vote,” *Electoral Studies* 66 (August 1, 2020): 102162, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102162>.

6 Anti-Corruption Commission, “National Integrity Assessment 2022,” (2023)

However, the score of 2.40 on perceived corruption indicates a high prevalence of perception of individuals providing payment in cash, kind, or services to gain voter support. While 94 percent of respondents said they had not witnessed or heard of parliamentarians misusing privileged information for personal gain, six percent of respondents said they had.

Additionally, according to three percent of respondents, there have been instances of parliamentarians operating private businesses (for example, the operation of private businesses such as mines and quarries, in collusion with private parties or enterprises). Furthermore, five percent of respondents thought that parliamentarians were being used for favours or extortion while carrying out their duties.

In a similar vein, the National Corruption Barometer Survey (NCBS) 2020⁷ assessed the experiences of corruption in the 2018 election. The report states that 36.6 percent of its respondents believed that corruption is common in elections. Furthermore, almost 12.5 percent of the respondents, household members, and other citizens have experienced bribes being offered in the form of cash or kind, or favour to vote for a particular candidate or party in the last general election.

When it comes to local government elections, the percentage seems a bit low, at 8.4 percent. Similarly, the NCBS 2023⁸ also assessed the perception of political parties in preventing corruption and promoting good governance. It is encouraging to note that more than 54 percent of the respondents feel that the political parties are effective in preventing corruption.

However, there are still 16 percent who said that the political parties were ineffective. One of the reasons for their ineffectiveness was their involvement in corruption and illegal activity, such as payment of cash or kind during election campaigns.

Implications for Democracy

Corruption can have a negative impact on election legitimacy and integrity. Election fairness can be harmed by corruption and voter intent

7 Bhutan Transparency Initiative, "National Corruption Barometer Survey," (2020)

8 Bhutan Transparency Initiative, "National Corruption Barometer Survey," (2023)

can be distorted, along with public confidence in democratic institutions.⁹ Additionally, it can contribute to unequal access to political power and resources, continue the cycle of corruption, and promote impunity. The promotion of democracy, accountability, and good governance therefore depends on measures to eliminate corruption in voting systems.

Additionally, corruption undermines democracy by compromising political equality, competition, and accountability, and reducing representatives' enthusiasm. It also undermines a government's role as a resource allocator, leading to cynicism, distrust, and voter apathy, potentially reducing voter turnout. It has been found that the impact of corruption on voter turnout can decrease trust in the political system and increase concerns around clean government issues.¹⁰ Therefore, the presence of high political trust minimises the negative impact of corruption.

Furthermore, the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, the National Assembly Act of Bhutan, the National Council Act of Bhutan, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)¹¹ recognise integrity, accountability, and transparency of parliamentarians and public officials as essential prerequisites for trust, reliability, and authority of government in a modern and democratic society. The absence of these prerequisites can jeopardise the fair distribution of resources and impede the socio-economic development of the nation, leading to corruption.

Challenges and Future Direction

It was pointed out that the three most corrupt entities identified by international organisations such as Transparency International, are the judiciary, police, and politicians. Globally, these areas are difficult to penetrate in terms of corruption prevention.

However, the case in Bhutan is different. It was the members of Parliament themselves who instructed the ACC to assess them as part of the NIA. While the judiciary and police are already covered in a different series of the NIA, the first-ever parliamentary assessment was done during the NIA

9 Dahlberg, Stefan, and Maria Solevid. 2016. "Does Corruption Suppress Voter Turnout?" *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties* 26 (4): 489–510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2016.1223677>.

10 Eunjung Choi and Jongseok Woo, "Political Corruption, Economic Performance, and Electoral Outcomes: A Cross-National Analysis," *Contemporary Politics* 16, no. 3 (August 16, 2010): 249–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2010.501636>.

11 Bhutan became a member of IPU in 2013. https://api.data.ipu.org/parliament/bt?chamber_id=13342

2022. Their consent to be part of an assessment of the anti-corruption study in itself is a landmark and exemplary move.

Furthermore, during the eighth session of the third Parliament¹², the National Assembly recommended that the ACC explore means to collaborate with the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) in the prevention of corruption during the election. This indicates the rampancy of corruption during the election period, calling for a clean and fairer election by the members.

However, there are minimal studies related to corruption or anti-corruption done in the context of elections and politics in Bhutan. The Scoping Mission Report of the ACC conducted in 2015 also identifies “election” as one of the most vulnerable areas of corruption. This calls for more empirical studies with regard to elections and corruption in Bhutan.

Conclusion

This article sheds light on the significance of voters’ perceptions of corruption among parliamentarians in Bhutan’s democratic systems. It utilises data from the Parliamentary Integrity Index of the National Integrity Assessment 2022 to provide insights into how these perceptions can influence electoral choices and the broader democratic landscape. The analysis highlights the importance of addressing corruption in politics, to maintain public trust and strengthen democratic institutions to make Bhutanese politics uniquely clean.

The paper raises different levels of perception of corruption among the parliamentarians as well as the electoral system. Generally, the perception of corruption in the form of misuse of information and favouritism seems low in the parliamentarians’ function, but the perception of payment in cash or kind during the election period to gain voter support is high, as depicted by the low integrity score in the PII.

In summary, this study underscores the multifaceted nature of corruption perceptions in the Bhutanese electoral context. The stark difference in integrity scores, as indicated by the Parliamentary Integrity Index (PII),

¹² <https://www.nab.gov.bt/assets/uploads/docs/resolution/2023/Resolutionofthe8thSessionEng04052023.pdf>

reveals that the battle against corruption in Bhutan's politics is far from over. To safeguard and further enhance the unique cleanliness of Bhutanese politics, there is an urgent need for targeted reforms and robust anti-corruption measures, especially during electoral processes.

Such efforts will preserve public trust and ensure the continued strength and integrity of Bhutan's democratic institutions. Ultimately, the findings of this study serve as a call to action, urging policy-makers and stakeholders to take concrete steps in addressing corruption and upholding the values of transparency and accountability in Bhutan's democracy.