

Political Awareness Grows Among Bhutanese

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On April 20, 2023, Bhutanese voters went to the polls to elect their representatives to the National Council (NC), the parliamentary House of Review. With 125 candidates running for the 20 seats, the fourth parliamentary election marked major changes in the 15 years of the country's democratic transition.

Changes in electoral rules by the Election Commission of Bhutan - for example, discontinuation of postal ballot facilities - were expected to cause a drastic drop in the number of eligible voters, but this election reported a record voter turnout in many polling stations across the country. The NC election also chose a new batch of politicians, winning over the incumbents by vast vote differences. Of the 10 incumbents who re-contested, only two were re-elected to the House.

Voters Choose New Candidates

The NC election saw 111 aspiring candidates, from which 89 individuals secured nominations through the *dhamgnoi zomdu*, a process at the gewog level to nominate a candidate to vie for seats at the dzongkhag level. It is a significant decrease compared with 127 candidates in the last NC election in 2018, but an increase from 52 candidates in 2008 and 67 candidates in 2013. Sarpang nominated nine candidates, the highest among the 20 dzongkhags, followed by Samtse with eight candidates. Sarpang is the fourth largest dzongkhag after Trashigang, Samtse, and Mongar with the highest number of voters.

Three aspiring candidates were disqualified because they could not produce the required documents and meet the 10-year work experience criterion. The new criteria emphasised experience, maturity, and qualification, aiming to bring seasoned professionals to the fore. Observers speculated that these more stringent rules might have contributed to the decreased number of contenders in this election.

All 10 incumbent NC members who chose to re-contest swiftly made it through their gewogs. The overall voters' choice for change became evident when only two out of 10 incumbent NC members were re-elected from their dzongkhags. Unlike in past elections, the amendment to the NC Act of 2008 allowed the incumbents to participate in the election without having to resign from their current positions.

This unexpected outcome left both political observers and citizens pondering over the reasons for this shift. Did the voters harbour a distrust of incumbents, or was it a need for fresh perspectives and ideas? Or is it scepticism - a wariness of allowing candidates' extended tenures which might foster complacency among elected representatives?

There is a growing concern that incumbents, if continuously re-elected, might begin to regard their roles as a given, straying from the core responsibilities of carrying the constituents' voices to the House of Review. There are indications that the voters are now well-informed about the roles of MPs in the National Council and National Assembly. In Dagana, for example, dissatisfaction among voters stemmed from an incumbent NC member's perceived inability to advance critical policies, such as the crop compensation policy.

The results also suggested that Bhutanese voters chose change over experience, signalling a desire for a departure from the status quo. Some voters say that "chance" should be given to repeat contestants who could not get the opportunity in the past.

In a close-knit community like Bhutan, it is usually observed that sympathy and compassion play a more important role than the political pledges made by aspiring politicians. For example, Thimphu voters say that they voted for a new councillor as he had contested before but failed to secure a seat in the NC. In Punakha, before the election, voters were seen openly talking about voting for the MP because he had contested in the past three elections. "Sympathy votes" could have been the decider in several dzongkhags.

Such trends, frequently seen during the NC elections, show the lack of seriousness of voters in choosing their representatives. Voters believe that the House of Review does not have any power over developmental activities as they are only mandated to review laws and policies whose impacts are

not easily felt or seen in their daily lives. For a farmer in a remote village, a blacktopped road is more important than the guidelines on farm roads, thus their passive involvement in the NC voting processes.

Lone Female in the NC

Since 2008, more women have registered to vote than male voters. In this election, 265,441 votes were cast, of which 130,636 were from men and 134,805 from women. In other words, there were 4,169 more females who voted. But the country continues to grapple with low female representation in politics. Women's participation in politics is still very low; out of the 89 aspiring candidates, only five were women.

Tshering Tshomo, 39, from Sonamthang in Ngangla gewog, managed to win by a few hundred votes, beating her four male opponents in Zhemgang. A businesswoman from Panbang in Zhemgang said that the community members were happy that they could elect a woman for the second time. Interestingly, in the four dzongkhags of Mongar, Sarpang, Punakha, and Zhemgang where female candidates were competing with men, there were more female eligible voters.

In 2018, of the six female candidates, two were elected, and four women were elected in 2008. In 2013, four women contested in the election, but none got elected. Does this mean that voters lack trust in the female candidates?

A member of the Parliament, Dil Maya Subba, said that the electorates need to be more educated. She thinks that resorting to sympathy votes over experience and ability is a wrong concept in a young democracy.

Cost of NC Elections

Although the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) did not release specific data, the recent NC elections was the most expensive elections so far. According to the election returns report, ECB spent Nu 18.85 million on the candidates in the fourth NC elections. On average, each of the 89 candidates spent Nu 211,896 on campaigns during the election. About 39 percent of the total campaign fund was spent on hiring

vehicles, 40 percent on daily subsistence allowance for candidates and their representatives, 14 percent on stationery and three percent on communications.

The ECB had proposed a budget of Nu 368.363 million for the NC elections, an increase of 47 percent over the elections in 2018 which was held at a cost of over Nu 245 million, while the election in 2008 was done at around Nu 99 million. Expenditures include the costs of materials, deployment of human resources for the three-month election period, and campaign funds for candidates.

Of the 866 polling stations across the country, the ECB did away with 55 polling stations as a cost-cutting measure. The number of polling officials was reduced by more than 200 individuals, with only 3,200 officials deputed at the polling stations. The campaign fund ceiling for each candidate was revised from Nu 130,000 in 2013 to Nu 150,000. Funds were used for campaign office spaces, utilities like water, telephone and electricity, hiring vehicles and goods and services for direct campaign purposes.

Increased Voter Turnout

The number of candidates contesting an election often has an impact on voter participation. The cultural obligation for citizens to vote when they have a relative or friend in the running is a unique electoral trend in Bhutan. This explains instances where voters traveled significant distances to cast their ballots. Despite these considerations, there were predictions of lower turnout because of restrictions on postal ballots and the elimination of mobile voting booths.

Contrary to this prediction, however, the 2023 NC election witnessed the highest voter turnout in the past 15 years. With nearly 55 percent of eligible voters participating, the election marked a success in democratic participation. This was a significant increase from the 53 percent turnout in the inaugural election in 2008 and 45.17 percent in 2013.

There were 485,811 eligible voters for the NC in the country, out of which 105,704 registered as postal voters. There were more female eligible voters – 249,071, representing more than 50 percent of the total eligible voters. An increase in voter turnout was observed in many dzongkhags. Before

the 2023 NC elections, residents of most dzongkhags reported witnessing bigger crowds in the towns, and heavier traffic movement. Samtse voters living in Thimphu, Paro and Wangduephodrang reached their stations in packed public buses and taxis. As the postal voting facilities were removed, many chose to travel to their constituencies to cast their votes.

With each election, the country has reported increased voter turnout. This could mean that people are more serious about how their votes have a bigger impact on the nation as a whole. As the elections come only once every five years, voting is taken as an individual duty by many Bhutanese.

For Yeshe Dorji from Khebisa in Dagana, democracy is the precious gift he obtained from the Fourth King, and that should be embraced by the people. Choosing the right leader who looks after the welfare of rural people is a serious responsibility, according to the 65-year-old. Aum Tandin Lham, 82, from Toebisa in Punakha, has never missed voting in an election - voting is a serious responsibility for the octogenarian. She is excited to vote for the National Assembly elections in November 2023. She thinks that her voice, even at her age, has the power to make a difference.

The trends and dynamics of Bhutan's NC elections are a reflection of the nation's evolving political consciousness.