

Social Hierarchy and Citizen Engagement in Bhutan

Kencho Pelzom

Abstract

This paper explores the influence of Bhutan's hierarchical social structure on citizen engagement and the development of open discourse. It examines historical and cultural contexts and the challenges and opportunities for fostering citizen engagement in a society deeply rooted in hierarchical values.

Introduction

Bhutan is often described as a “traditional” and “homogeneous” society. The term traditional is used to describe the country's rich cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. Many admire its beautiful architecture and cohesive community and praise Bhutanese society for its close-knit social fabric, with values of strong community belongingness.

However, in the past decade, the slow disintegration of the community fabric has been a growing concern for the State.¹ A rich social fabric enhances belongingness by providing a sense of purpose to its community members. Hierarchy is the foundational social structure of such a traditional society, requiring its members to strictly observe it in formal and personal spheres.

The society does not welcome any deviant behaviour from its members. Any open criticism of the social values and norms or feedback on State policy can be considered deviant or rebellious, hence informally censoring any form of healthy citizen debate and engagement on State policy. Although it has been only six decades since it embraced “cautious” modernisation, Bhutan is at present considered one of the fastest-growing economies in the South Asia region.² Forty-one percent of the population is below 24

1 Phuntsho, Karma. 2020. “Tradition--Lost in changes.”

2 Lhaden, Tenzin. 2018. An update on Bhutan's economy, World Bank.

years old, according to UNFPA, Bhutan.³ With such a young demography, the country has a lot of potential for development and growth.

However, the youth unemployment rate in 2024 is 19.2%, according to the National Statistical Bureau.⁴ Having a youthful population also means adapting to changes at a pace like never before, whether at a family level or the state governance approach.

Bhutan was unified as a State in the 1620s by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel with the formation of a centralised government having authority over the territory of Bhutan and its people. This was the foundation of what would become a nation State under the institution of Monarchy in 1907. Bhutan as a political entity is where the State and national identity align, with the government reflecting the cultural and religious identity of the Bhutanese people.⁵ The foundation of the Bhutanese State is deeply rooted in Buddhism, with a strong emphasis on the paternalistic role of the State and the value of interdependence, focusing on the importance of community.

After 16 years of being a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy (since 2008), Bhutan has come far in educating and engaging its citizens successfully in the transition to democracy. To further enhance and deepen its democracy, public engagement in debate and dialogue in decision-making is essential to turn the electorate into active citizens. Given its history and culture of being a traditional society with a strong emphasis on order, hierarchy and obedience, its citizens are transitioning from being subjects to fully active citizens. This paper will explore social hierarchy in the Bhutanese context and its implication on citizen engagement as a democratic state. It evaluates the interplay between hierarchical social norms and democratic engagement in Bhutanese society.

Background

Hierarchy refers to a system of organisation in which people or groups are ranked one above the other according to status or authority. It is a

3 UNFPA. 2024. Bhutan: Population Dynamics and *Data*.

4 National Statistical Bureau. 2024. LABOUR FORCE SURVEY

5 Sonam, Kinga. 2009. Polity, Kingship and Democracy Ministry of Education Royal Government of Bhutan A biography of the Bhutanese state

central feature in many social structures, including families, institutions and governments, and dictates how individuals interact and the power dynamics within a society.⁶ In the context of Bhutan, hierarchical values are deeply rooted in cultural norms and religious beliefs, significantly influencing social interactions and the exercise of authority.

The origin of the term democracy dates back to ancient Greece – demos, meaning the people, and cracy, derived from Kratos, meaning power or rule.⁷ Simply put, democracy means rule by the people. According to Christiano and Bajaj (2022), democracy “refers very generally to a method of collective decision-making characterised by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the decision-making process.”⁸ Democracy can be direct or indirect. The classic democracy that has inspired the current understanding of democracy was a direct form of democracy, while most of the recent or current existing democracies are limited and representative or indirect democracies. For Bhutan, democracy involves transitioning from traditional hierarchical governance to a system where citizen engagement and public discourse are essential for the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Democratic Constitutional Monarchy.

The foundation of modern democracy’s legitimacy is based on its citizens’ power to choose their representatives, and on citizen engagement. A voter’s choice in electing their representative is often seen as one of the legitimising acts. However, citizen engagement is a foundational need for healthy democratic processes that extend beyond voting. Citizen engagement is defined as a citizen’s influence on political outcomes by actively participating in the political process, including voting, attending local-level meetings, participating in public consultations, and engaging in dialogue and debate about public policies.⁹ One of the requirements for citizen engagement is active and voluntary engagement in decision-making, rather than sporadic passive engagement during the election. It is a critical component of a healthy democracy, as it ensures that the voices of the people are heard and considered in decision-making. In hierarchical societies like Bhutan, citizen engagement can be hindered by cultural

6 Weber, Max. 1947. *The Theory Of Social And Economic Organization*. Edited by Talcott Parsons.

7 Heywood, Andrew. 2004. *Political Theory: An Introduction*.

8 Christiano, Tom, and Sameer Bajaj. 2006. “Democracy.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

9 Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. 1995. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*

norms that emphasise respect for authority and discourage questioning and dissent.

Research on democratic transitions in developing countries across Asia, Latin America and Africa highlights how variations in social values - such as collectivism versus individualism, and the emphasis on order, hierarchy, obedience and freedom - influence the level of citizen engagement. These cultural differences play a crucial role in shaping how democracy is understood, defined and developed in these regions.

Asian values are studied in three broad categories when understanding development and democratic regimes across the Asian region: 1) values that are specific to Asia that form the basis of the region's political, social and economic institutions, 2) tracing the historical roots of values and Asian standards concerning norms such as individual freedom, and 3) a study of Asian values from an empirical approach comparing regions and across nations.¹⁰ Values such as filial piety - complete respect for parents and obedience - are the core values that guide the family in many Asian societies, including Bhutan. These family values guide both private and public areas of life. Placing community over individual goals and freedom is another Asian value that deeply guides the society's interaction and state objectives. Deference to hierarchy and authority is also seen as an important Asian value.¹¹

Bhutanese values Case Example

The teacher/guru-student/disciple relationship in Vajrayana Buddhism is sacred, requiring full faith and unwavering dedication or submission to the teacher's way of guiding the student. As Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentshe Rinpoche states: "If you are uncomfortable with the non-dual groundlessness of Buddhism – you might just as well follow one of the Abrahamic religions."¹² To have a teacher to guide them in this life is extremely important in Buddhism and teachers who accept a student cannot leave the student behind "no matter how irritating, stubborn,

10 Kim, So Young. 2010. "Do Asian Values Exist? Empirical Tests of the Four Dimensions of Asian Values." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10 (2): 315-344.

11 Kim, So Young. 2010. "Do Asian Values Exist? Empirical Tests of the Four Dimensions of Asian Values." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10 (2):315-344.

12 Rinpoche, Dzongsar Khyentse. 2017. "Guru and Student in the Vajrayana - The Chronicles of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche.

neurotic or even criminal they may be, the guru must accept that person as his student and look after him or her as if they were his own child.”¹³

This role of the teacher was extended into formal school education when modern education was introduced in Bhutan in the 1960s. On top, the Guru-shishya tradition influenced by Indian teachers working in Bhutan, has further shaped the understanding and role of teachers in Bhutan. The teacher-student relationship in Bhutan emphasises uneven power dynamics and authority, along with obedience and submission from students. This can be considered a foundation of the value of respect for authority and hierarchy in Bhutanese society. This value has also shaped leaders and leadership roles and ideals in Bhutan. Obedience is considered as important in the relationship of teacher and student, parent and child vis-a-vis the state and its citizens. Values such as respecting parents, teachers and authority alike are considered core social values to navigate society.

Respect for family and authority can be loosely relatable to the Chinese Confucian virtue of filial piety. Observing hierarchy in family relations or beyond is considered a social norm, although this is changing in the current context. Like in most South Asian societies, the State in Bhutan is considered an extension of the family with the role of paternalism.¹⁴

The title “Dasho” in Bhutan, as per the rule, is a formal title for civilians who have served the country and have been acknowledged by the institution of Monarchy in the form of a Red Scarf. However, the informal social practice is that anyone who is in a position of some social stature is addressed as Dasho, depending on where you are in Bhutan. This is the informal practice of “Dasho culture” in Bhutan. For example, in Thimphu, all bureaucrats above the director level, armed forces officers and most recently, members of parliament, are informally called Dasho. Sometimes, people married into the Royal family are also called Dasho. As you travel to more remote parts of the country, the title will be used more loosely and freely.

Traditionally, the title Dasho was for men in social and formal positions, who had the power (formal or informal) and authority to make decisions

13 Rinpoche, Dzongsar Khyentse. 2017. “Guru and Student in the Vajrayana - The Chronicles of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche.

14 Kim, So Young. 2010. “Do Asian Values Exist? Empirical Tests of the Four Dimensions of Asian Values.” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10 (2):315-344.

and command obedience in the society or family. The equal term for women of such status is “Aum” which loosely translates as “being wife to Dasho”, a few decades ago. However, now Aum is also used for women who have social status formally or informally, like Dasho. This strict informal Dasho culture observation of social hierarchy directly influences citizens’ behaviour and has created an informal structure of how and what can be discussed in society, even in social gatherings. The informal hierarchical social structure in Bhutan, deeply rooted in cultural norms and an emphasis on obedience, poses significant challenges to fostering active citizen engagement and a participatory democratic culture. This structure can inhibit open discourse and limit the development of a robust democracy, as citizens may feel constrained by traditional expectations of deference to authority.¹⁵

The final case from the Bhutanese context is driglam namzha, the formal etiquette guide drawn from the Royal court etiquette and monastic values, which was made an official policy to guide the bureaucracy in the early 1989s.¹⁶ This is often extended to an informal social interaction, when a common person is in the same space with someone of social or economic stature. Bhutanese are taught very early to identify this social hierarchy and learn to navigate it. What this process has indirectly taught many Bhutanese is to be obedient rather than responsible as a citizen. Obedience encourages people to listen and be silent rather than being inquisitive about things around them. As a result, we have become a society that is obedient but possesses a passive-aggressive nature. We only observe position and status as a ritual, without real belief.

Obedience in both formal and informal deliberations in the Bhutanese context is never an agreement but can be a silent resentment that will ultimately lead to the failure of anything that was decided. According to Young (2010), Asian values of paternalism and duty-based obedience often contradict political democracy and capitalist economy.¹⁷

Young, in his 2010 comparative empirical study on Asian values and their influence on development and democracy, found that South and Southeast Asians regarded family norms such as filial piety as being stronger and

15 Dryzek, John S. 2002. *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations*

16 Phuntsho, Karma. 2017. “Driglam Namzha: Bhutan’s Code of Etiquette.” *Mandala Collections*.

17 Kim, So Young. 2010. “Do Asian Values Exist? Empirical Tests of the Four Dimensions of Asian Values.” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10 (2):315-344.

more important than in other Asian regions. South and Southeast Asians reported stronger imagery of the state as an extension of the family, indicating that South and Southeast Asians are more likely to have a higher deference to hierarchy and authority.

According to the Constitution of Bhutan, all citizens are equal in front of the law of the country.¹⁸ However, social hierarchy norms indicate that people are unequal, ascribing norms of how to behave when in contact with individuals of higher social stature in informal settings. This suppresses a person's voice and opinion to suit the social setting, which is a barrier to citizen engagement for democracy. Even if the Constitution guarantees free speech and opinion, the actual practice of it will only be symbolic.

This case of deference to authority and position is often observed more visibly in formal settings, in the case of local government engagements for decision-making. Most local meetings are often attended by women, who do not usually raise concerns regarding the topics discussed, participating more for presence than meaningful discussion. The informal behaviour or perception of status has been diffused in the context of modernisation, where people driving larger or fancier cars are given the right of way in parking spaces or traffic. This behaviour extends to services like the law, where policemen and other service providers prioritise services to "seniors". Even the general public tends to make way for Dashos in queues or in order of priority for all services and facilities.

Discussion and Conclusion

In Bhutan, the ingrained cultural values of hierarchy and obedience significantly shape social interactions and political engagement. Hierarchy is deeply rooted in Bhutanese society, influenced by Buddhist teachings and the historical structure of the state. Respect for authority figures such as teachers, parents and government officials is paramount, echoing the Confucian virtue of filial piety. This cultural norm extends to the informal practice of bestowing the title Dasho and Aum on individuals in positions of power, further reinforcing social stratification.

These hierarchical norms impact citizen engagement by fostering an environment where obedience and deference to authority are prioritised

¹⁸ Royal Government of Bhutan. 2023. "The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan ."

over active participation and critical discourse. The practice of driglam namzha, which outlines formal etiquette and decorum, reinforces these hierarchical interactions, often discouraging open dialogue and dissent. As a result, citizens may feel inhibited in expressing their views or challenging decisions made by those in authority.

The emphasis on submission has led to a society where passive compliance is often mistaken for agreement. This passive aggression dynamic undermines the effectiveness of democratic engagement, as citizens may attend meetings and forums without genuinely contributing to the discussion or voicing their concerns. Consequently, this limits the development of a vibrant public sphere essential for a healthy democracy.

For Bhutan to mature as a democracy, it is essential to address informal social practices that inhibit citizen engagement and control behaviour. Promoting civic education, fostering inclusive dialogue, and encouraging active participation over hierarchical obedience are crucial steps. By educating citizens and evolving their political decision-making, Bhutan can foster a culture of inquiry and responsible citizenship. This transition will help transform Bhutanese citizens from being passive subjects to active participants in the democratic process, thereby deepening the values of democracy.

To improve citizen engagement and mitigate the effects of social hierarchy in Bhutan, recommendations are needed to assess the impact of the current civic education curriculum on citizen engagement, and to identify gaps and more context-driven processes to help overcome cultural barriers for citizen engagement. This could include creating a citizen engagement forum that is sensitive to cultural barriers for different age groups, and supporting cultural programmes that emphasise collective decision-making and mutual respect that are specific to the Bhutanese context. Finally, youth participation should be encouraged by providing platforms for youths to voice their concerns and contribute to policy-making.

Reference

- Bhutan, Royal Government of. 2023. *The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan*. Thimphu: Royal Government of Bhutan. Accessed August 6, 2024. <https://parliament.bt/the-constitution-of-the-kingdom-of-bhutan>.
- Bureau, National Statistical. 2024. *LABOUR FORCE SURVEY*. Thimphu, Bhutan.: Royal Government of Bhutan.
- Christiano, Tom, and Sameer Bajaj. 2006. "Democracy." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Accessed August 25, 2024. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democracy/>.
- Dahl, Robert A. 1989. *Democracy and its critics*. Yale University Press.
- Dryzek, John S. 2002. *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations*. United State of America: Oxford University Press.
- Heywood, Andrew. 2004. *Political Theory: An Introduction*. 3rd edition. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kim, So Young. 2010. "Do Asian Values Exist? Empirical Tests of the Four Dimensions of Asian Values." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10 (2): 315-344. Accessed July 25, 2024.
- Knowles, Ryan Thomas. 2015. "Asian values and democratic citizenship: exploring attitudes among South Korean eighth graders using data from the ICCS Asian Regional Module." *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 35 (2): 191-212. Accessed July 25, 2024.
- Lhaden, Tenzin. 2018. An update on Bhutan's economy, World Bank. November 13. Accessed August 2, 2024. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/endpovertyinsouthasia/update-bhutan-s-economy#:~:text=Bhutan%20is%20one%20of%20the%20smallest%2C%20but%20fastest-growing,the%20average%20global%20growth%20rate%20of%203.2%20percent>.

- Mathou, Thierry. 1999. "BHUTAN: POLITICAL REFORM IN A BUDDHIST MONARCHY." *Journal for Bhutanese Studies* 1 (2): 114. Accessed July 28, 2024. https://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt/publicationFiles/JBS/JBS1_Vol1_No1/5.PoliticalReform.pdf.
- Mills, Charles Wright. 1959. *The Power Elite* (Galaxy Books). Oxford University Press.
- Phuntsho, Karma. 2017. "Driglam Namzha: Bhutan's Code of Etiquette." *Mandala Collections*. Accessed August 1, 2014. <https://texts.mandala.library.virginia.edu/text/driglam-namzha-bhutans-code-etiquette>. —. 2018. *The History of Bhutan*. Penguin Random House India Private Limited.
- Phuntsho, Karma. 2020. "Tradition--Lost in changes." *The Druk Journal* 100-108.
- Putnam, Robert D. 2020. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon & Schuster.
- Rinpoche, Dzongsar Khyentse. 2017. "Guru and Student in the Vajrayana - The Chronicles of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche." *Chronicles of Chogyam Trungpa*. August 28. Accessed August 25, 2024. <https://www.chronicleproject.com/guru-student-vajrayana/>. —. 2017. *Guru and Student in the Vajrayana*. August 28. Accessed August 1, 2014. <https://www.chronicleproject.com/guru-student-vajrayana/>.
- Sonam, Kinga. 2009. *Polity, Kingship and Democracy: A biography of the Bhutanese state*. Royal Government of Bhutan Ministry of Education. Thimphu.
- Stepan, Juan J. Linz & Alfred. 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. United State of America : The Johns Hopkins University Press.

- UNFPA. 2024. Bhutan: Polpulation Dynamics and Data. Accessed August 3, 2024. <https://bhutan.unfpa.org/en/topics/population-dynamics-and-data>.
- Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. 1995. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Harvard University Press.
- Weber, Max. 1947. *The Theory Of Social And Economic Organization*. Edited by Talcott Parsons. Translated by Alexander Morell Henderson and Talcott Parsons. Free Press.