

The Bhutanese Politicians

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It was almost typical in the past for a family in the backwoods of the country to occasionally greet “government people” at their doors.

It was either the agriculture extension officer communicating about the use of fertilisers, or the village health worker conveying health and sanitation tips, or the local representatives summoning villagers to a meeting about an impending road construction nearby.

But a day came when new faces, assuming a mantle totally unheard of, appeared on the doorsteps of the farmers. They claimed to be on a glorious mission of serving the King, country, and people.

The visitors convened numerous meetings where they promised to transform the community and the lives of villagers, almost overnight. The newcomers sought their support. They needed votes.

As the rural folks put it these were the “Party people”. That was in 2007 when the democratic process commenced.

Since then, over the two parliamentary elections that Bhutan has had, more individuals have appeared in their hometowns, declaring themselves as candidates for one of the political Parties. They expressed their aspirations to contest elections and sought endorsement.

They were the fresh wave of Bhutanese politicians, churned out of the democratic system that was introduced. The men, and a few women, had come forward to form political Parties, a concept unheard of until then.

Today, as the nation is on the verge of its third parliamentary elections, and as political Parties are going all out to cajole prospective candidates, more politicians are in the making. The mainstream and social media flash announcements of new party candidates almost every second week.

The Start

It all took off with the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) inviting interested Bhutanese citizens to form political parties. The parties were to ensure a broad-based, cross-national membership and support, among other conditions.

A visible response came from the serving chimmis (grassroots representatives), who were representing different parts of the country at the National Assembly then. Having landed there through an election process, it was understandable that the chimmis showed enthusiasm.

That changed when possession of a formal university degree became a requisite for aspiring Parliament members. The disappointed chimmis, who came loaded with local knowledge and wisdom but without formal university education, caused much rumblings in the press.

With its prominence, the bureaucracy was then seen as the most likely source of candidates and serving ministers as party leaders. Two political parties secured registration and went on to contest the first parliamentary elections in March, 2008.

Five years on, in 2013, three new political parties had secured registration. In building up their team of 47 candidates from as many constituencies, more people joined politics. While some of those who fell out of the race in the first elections returned this time, others departed from the political scene for good.

Today, the political cluster is rapidly expanding, with political parties setting out on a vigorous hunt for suitable candidates. While no new political parties have secured registration for now the existing ones, including those outside the Parliament, are fortifying their camps by launching new faces in the political arena.

The Political Composition

As long as one is a citizen of Bhutan, aged between 25 and 65 years, possesses a university degree and has not been convicted of a criminal offence, one can opt to contest in the elections.

These are some of the criteria stated in the electoral law but is that all it takes to join politics?

Candidates for National Council elections, considering its apolitical mandate, need not be affiliated to any political party and so their decisions to run are arrived at without much predicament. So far, individuals from all professional backgrounds have emerged to serve as politicians.

There are teachers, doctors, ministers, bureaucrats, private consultants, judges, lawyers, and soldiers, and those from the corporate sector and non-government organisations.

In terms of education, records show highly qualified candidates have come forward since the first parliamentary elections. When the process started, People's Democratic Party (PDP) had two candidates with doctorates and 21 with Masters degrees. Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) had one with a doctorate and 16 with Masters degrees. Most of the contestants were aged between 41 and 50 years.

Without any political backstory before the democratic process unfolded what made these individuals embrace the undefined path of politics?

Their reasons varied from wanting to try out something new to giving in to the persuasion of colleagues and superiors who were already into politics.

For Tenzin Lekphell, General Secretary of Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa, who started his political career with PDP, it was because of the excitement surrounding the first elections and wanting to be a part of it. "It was much later that I felt the real sense of purpose in being a politician in Bhutan," Tenzin Lekphell said.

Politicians could play a pivotal role in contributing to the democratic process, outlining plans and programmes imperative to nation-building, while aspiring to win elections in order to fulfil them.

For many, such motivations over the years have not really changed but some are driven by specific goals.

One of the newest entrants in politics, former journalist Passang Dorji, who joined DPT in February, said he saw it as a calling that challenged his beliefs and courage.

"If we want our democracy to succeed, we cannot make politics a convenient source of employment and a profession to retire to," he said. "I intend to motivate mid-level professionals to take up the responsibility and make our democracy work."

As a former journalist Passang Dorji also aspires to be of some use in promoting the practice of vibrant journalism which is almost fading at the moment, to contribute towards consolidating the young democracy.

For others, it was about writing a political script that is special to Bhutan, rather than perpetuating political trends borrowed from elsewhere.

Less than a year into politics Bhutan Kuen-nyam Party president, Dasho Neten Zangmo, said she was driven by the conviction to speak a different political language, a definition unique to Bhutan.

The practice so far, she said, had resulted in division in the family, disharmony in the community, and fears instilled in people, consequences too costly for a small country.

Parliament representative Tshewang Jurme, who entered party politics after serving as a member of the National Council in the first five years, said it was an opportunity to serve his constituents hands-on, rather than from the earlier mandate of overall policy review and legislation.

“Not many people know the difference though,” the PDP candidate said.

What it Entails?

From the day you decide to join politics you are a public figure. You need to articulate well and it is even better if you can do so in the national language. You are closely followed. With every new contact you build an old acquaintance exits. Some do not want to be seen together. Others assume every word that you speak is laden with an agenda for personal gain.

That is on the outside. On a personal front you have, with much apprehension, left a secure job. Some family members rebuke you for making a decision seen as impractical and irresponsible. What if you lose the elections?

Those who have tested the political waters said it takes a whole lot of nerve and a great deal of planning to be a politician in Bhutan. It is a full-time job that solicits commitment and energy.

PDP’s Parliamentary representative, Tshewang Jurme, said that once into politics, it only made sense for politicians to play the game well. “In pursuit of the noble visions of our Kings politicians should be dynamic, open to criticism, and ensure they don’t take voters for granted,” he said. He also noted that those pursuing politics should ensure financial security for the family and put in place a “plan B” to fall back on.

Those failing to secure a win in past elections had to restart their career by joining private firms and non-government organisations. With a few exceptions, that was the end of their political stint.

Dasho Neten Zangmo admitted that there were practical aspects to it and that there was no system or infrastructure to support one for an interim period. That was one of the biggest impediments while dealing with prospective candidates.

It was common, while approaching a likely candidate, for them to claim to be anything but “cut out” for politics.

Dasho Neten Zangmo said if you have to ape politics prevalent the world over, one might not be cut out to fit the bill. “However, if you are convinced that Bhutanese have to define their own path any businessman or a person walking on the street is suitable for politics,” she said. She added that in order to win, everyone preferred to go by the definition of a conventional politician, and those trying to do it differently are perceived to be too naïve and stupid.

DNT’s Tenzin Lekphell, who is well-versed in hunting for candidates since the last elections in order to put his party together, said consideration of politics varied from one person to another with most experiencing the dilemma of exiting a comfortable life to deal with repercussions in the public domain.

However, with all the events that unfolded over the years, Tshewang Jurme said politicians have some serious image-building to do.

“For whatever reason politicians are viewed with much scepticism,” he said.

Tenzin Lekphell also said politicians were viewed as “greedy” people in pursuit of perks and status. In putting the house in order, discussions on entitlements — stamping a logo on the cars of Parliament members for example — sent out the wrong messages.

“There could be those who are pursuing self-interest but how about those who are genuine?”

Reiterating the responsibility politicians shoulder, Tenzin Lekphell said divisions that politics create, and mistakes politicians make, could have inconceivable implications on a small country like Bhutan.

Looking Ahead

In December last year, a conference — first of its kind in the country — brought together members and representatives of all five political parties to review the journey thus far. In the discussions they committed themselves to place national interests before that of their parties. They pledged to act as “Bhutanese first”.

Perhaps the determination to translate that spirit into action should be the biggest quality in a Bhutanese politician.

As the key players of a democratic process politicians should conduct themselves responsibly, work with humility, and refrain from personal attacks and corrupt practices. Those at the helm of political parties should strive to enroll candidates that exude the right values and attitudes and base their campaigns on strategies that place the spirit of the Bhutanese first.

Irrespective of what transpired in the first decade of our democratic process, the ideal way forward is to embrace political pursuits beyond elections and beyond 2018.

The onus falls on the politicians to redefine a democracy that matches the aspirations of our Kings and the expectations of the people.