

Dr Karma Phuntsho

On Bhutanese Democracy

After two successive elections and governments, Dr Karma Phuntsho shares some of his reflections on Bhutan's democracy and electoral practices with The Druk Journal.

The Druk Journal: How would you rate the introduction of democracy to Bhutan in the past 10 years?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: Democracy was not introduced to Bhutan in the past 10 years. It was already deeply ingrained in the Bhutanese cultural and philosophical outlook, which is informed by the Buddha's egalitarian principles and pursuit of freedom. Buddhism teaches freedom and enlightenment as the ultimate goals of life. Bhutan already had a profound and pervasive culture of democratic thought and practice, which was manifested particularly in the spiritual domain.

What was newly introduced in the past decade is the election of the bicameral parliament through votes, using a popular Western form of voting procedures. This is relatively new in Bhutan and it is taking time for people to get accustomed to it, but this was also introduced gradually with a series of preparations in the 20th century.

One very important thing for us to remember is that democracy is not just about the political exercise and electoral processes to elect the parliament. We need to promote democracy as a social ethos of freedom, conscientious citizenry, self-determination, and civil rights and responsibilities. There is a general tendency among the Bhutanese to identify democracy with just the political elections. People rarely talk about democracy in the judiciary system, governance, work place, and other contexts. Free and fair access to justice, with dignity, is as much a democratic right as electing a government. Similarly, equal opportunities of employment, equal pay for the same amount of work, physical access for people with special needs, consultative decision-making, right to information, fair reporting — to mention a few examples — are as important democratic practices as casting votes during elections.

The Druk Journal: What can we do to improve democracy as a political process?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: The most important thing is to make the democratic process as convenient and easy as possible for people to participate in, before they develop political apathy, which is disastrous for democracy. The Election

Commission of Bhutan is already making a lot of progress in this regard. The fact that many more people can avail themselves of postal ballot facilities in 2018 is a great improvement. Eventually, we should be able to make it easy for people to securely vote from anywhere in the world without even relying on postal ballots. After all, we are only fewer than half a million voters.

The Druk Journal: How can we enhance citizen participation in elections?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: Voter turn-out in the past elections was quite high compared with other countries, although it may dwindle in the future. In addition to making voting as easy as possible, we can also scrap the disfranchisement of religious persons. Except for some public religious figures, monks and priests should be allowed — and in fact persuaded — to bear the responsibility of electing the government to which we entrust the country for five years. The current rule prohibiting religious persons from voting contradicts the Constitution, and also does not align with Bhutan’s own history and social culture, or with international norms such as the universal declaration of human rights. Religious persons, like civil servants, must remain apolitical, but should be given the right and responsibility to cast their vote.

The Druk Journal: Does the current system lead to a fair representation?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: While the current practice allows a fair representation within the given space, there are a few things we can do to actually expand the space.

Firstly, we could drop the requirement of a university degree through full-time education to stand as a candidate. While one can understand the initial reason for putting such a criteria in place, this is a disabling factor when it comes to political participation. It does not sit well with an individual’s democratic right to stand for an office.

Given the diversity of colleges and courses across the globe, a university degree does not ensure the ability to be a leader and people’s representative. Also, there are many great leaders who never went to college, even in our country.

Instead, it would be better to institute a standard examination, which can test the candidate’s knowledge and awareness of national and international affairs and the ability to be a leader, similar to the literacy test for local government candidates and civil service exam for civil servants. This would keep off the unqualified and opportunistic candidates, some of whom may be joining to just avail themselves of the state election funding. The other thought regarding representation is a more complicated one for

some Bhutanese to understand. The first-past-the-post system we have adopted is easy to understand and implement, but it can result in a grossly unfair representation. In 2008, while People's Democratic Party got some 37 percent of total votes, it had only two seats in the National Assembly out of 47, so about 4 percent. The first National Assembly thus did not accurately represent the people's will. In the future, it may be good to think of having a more appropriate system of representation, perhaps combining first-past-the-post and proportional representation.

A third thought is about the two phases of National Assembly elections. While one can appreciate the rationale for having only two parties in the parliament, and how it can avoid hung parliaments, it deprives people of the opportunity to send the candidate of their choice to the parliament, if the candidate does not belong to the two leading parties. Moreover, one observes that elections in countries which adopt bipartisan systems are more fierce and vicious — giving rise to deep divisions in the community — than in countries where there are more than two parties in the parliament.

Although we did not have demonstrations and bloodshed, Bhutan's adoption of democracy has been a violent one in social and emotional respects. Families, friends, and communities have never before been so deeply divided and split apart as they were through party politics. Having more than two parties in the parliament may reduce the extremely polarised political discourse and debates, and diffuse some of the unwanted tensions and vitriolic exchanges.

The Druk Journal: Do you think that Bhutanese politicians are stereotypically and unfairly branded as being corrupt and unethical?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: Sadly, yes. This is a case of a bad cliché, which is widespread in the rest of the world, and the Bhutanese blindly follow. In all honesty, herd mentality is a problem in our country. People need to learn to be independent thinkers and also eschew stereotyping.

Not all politicians are corrupt or unethical, although there are some who may be wilfully unethical or making mistakes unwittingly. There are many politicians with stellar integrity. Having said that, it is important that politicians are kept under close scrutiny by the people, and held accountable for their misdeeds.

The Druk Journal: Gender has become an issue, given the relatively few women participants. Do you think that a quota for women parliamentarians is necessary to encourage women's representation?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: I could not agree more that female representation in the government and parliament is really dismal. Only about 8% of the government executives are female and we have only four elected women, out of 67 elected members in the current parliament. The prospect of having more elected in 2018 also looks poor.

Thus, it is a matter of serious concern for a country which had traditionally better gender parity than most countries in the world. We were and still are largely a matrilineal society, and a state which boasts of Vajrayana Buddhism, in which femininity is celebrated, and criticism of the female person is a major violation of religious precepts.

Low female representation in public offices today is certainly not because our women are not capable of taking up important positions and roles. If we look at the civil society sector, most of the big organisations are led by women. Similarly, in the private sector, many large business houses are run by women. Female principals head big private schools while the executive positions in government schools are still dominated by men.

We must find ways to empower and encourage women to take up political and public roles, and to eliminate cultural and social hurdles they face. While the state and the society need to find ways to enhance female participation in politics, I personally don't think offering quotas for women in the parliament is the right answer. The quota allocation goes against the fundamental democratic principles of equality and fair competition. It could also hamper the opportunity for our women to develop on par with men.

The Druk Journal: What can we do to ensure more professional youth participation in the future?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: There is currently a vibrant participation of youth in politics, both in numbers of youth who are standing for office and who are voting. What we need is to put more effort in educating the youth about democracy beyond and beside the political elections. There is also a need for better screening and grooming of quality candidates, and the type of examination suggested above can help.

The Druk Journal: Would you agree that the Election Commission of Bhutan regulations are a bit stifling? In election year, aren't there too many things that we are not allowed to do?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: We must appreciate that the Election Commission is doing what they can to ensure a free and fair election but, as I said earlier, we need to see democracy as being greater than politics. Human life is multi-faceted and complex; politics is only one aspect. As such, the political process of elections should not be inconvenience, let alone cancel, other processes of life. Stopping all events and gatherings throughout the long election season can cause tremendous economic, social and cultural damage, and loss. As it is, the productivity of the people, particularly farmers, will be less this year than in other years, with a series of campaign meetings, hustings, and ballots to take place.

So, it is important that people also carry on with other affairs of their life while also taking part in the elections. I came across friends who were deferring even their regular board meetings and office workshops due to the elections. My understanding is that the Election Commission requested the public to avoid gatherings which could be unfairly used as political platforms and lead to disputes. The Bhutanese electorate must use its political savvy and responsibility to ensure that no untoward or unlawful events take place, but we should not be required to suspend all gatherings and events.

The Druk Journal: What kind of political outcome can Bhutan expect in 2018?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: While it is premature to say anything about the party political outcomes in 2018, one thing is sure for Bhutan: The Bhutanese electorate have gained much more maturity and judiciousness by this third election season. Neither populist ideas and petty campaign promises nor charismatic personalities will easily sway the voters.

The educated elites in Thimphu and other urban areas will also have much less influence on the rural voters, compared with past elections. The Bhutanese electorate has also now become very sensitive to the externalities attempting to influence the process of elections. Many are going to look for candidates with high integrity and a far-sighted vision, but there is also a slight risk of some people making elections a farce, out of frustration.