

How the Bhutanese Vote in Elections: a Broad Mindscape of the Bhutanese Voter

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The Family Factor

As the 2008 general election loomed, a family of six in Baynangra village in Pemagatshel was forced to flee their home to a nearby cowshed. Seventy-year-old Lungten and his 66-year-old wife Phurpa had to take shelter in the cowshed, along with their four children, when their dominant son Kencho threatened to burn down the house if they did not support the political party of his choice. When persuasion and coercion failed to get his family members to fall in line with him, 30-year-old Kencho resorted to threats. The family is believed to have voted for one party after its fleeing members came back home.

This incident demonstrates the influence and pressure family and social connections exert on party allegiance and vote. Family connections were known to have strongly determined political candidates' success in elections in Bhutan, particularly in the first parliamentary election. Some analysts attribute the electoral success of the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) in 2008 partly to their astuteness to take advantage of the country's strong traditional family and social fabric. It worked because the country voted for two parties without ideological differences and for candidates making similar election pledges.

For a largely politically illiterate electorate voting for the first time, family and social connections were the most obvious and easiest to identify with. In fact, the DPT was believed to have identified a number of its candidates based on the influence and connections of their families. For example, the party chose 27-year-old Karma Lhamo, the daughter of a former *lam neten* who is influential in several gewogs, to stand against a former minister in Mongar constituency. And it worked. Karma Lhamo swept a clean win, picking up 76 percent of the votes. She says that her family connections played a big role in her win.

In Trongsa, the DPT picked 30-year-old Rinchen Dorji, the son of Ugyen, who had been the gup of Langthel for 34 years, as their candidate. Rinchen Dorji says he was known among the people of his constituency as the son of Gup Ugyen.

A post-election survey conducted by Thimphu-based Centre for Research Initiative (CRI), the only independent firm that conducted surveys on both 2008 and 2013 elections, found that the voting decision of 43 percent of the respondents was influenced by their relatives.

Observers say family connections worked in the 2008 parliamentary elections because other baselines for judging a candidate, such as party ideologies and manifestoes, were too similar for comparison. However, in the 2013 National Assembly election, a number of factors, such as the government's performance, Bhutan's relations with its neighbours, and people's political maturity, relegated the influence of family and social connections to secondary importance. However, it remains an important factor among political candidates.

Party Leadership

Party leadership must be seen from the perspective of lack of ideological positions among the parties, lack of discerning political maturity among the voters, and a nagging sense of insecurity in the democratic system of governance.

The Bhutanese people expressed their doubts – even fear – when His Majesty The Fourth Druk Gyalpo announced Bhutan's democratic transition. They looked for continuity and stability in the first election and they found it in the DPT in the form of five former ministers and senior bureaucrats who were groomed by the fourth Druk Gyalpo. Change was impressed upon them but they did not want a complete overhaul. Five years down the line in 2013, though, the Bhutanese voted for a drastic change.

Besides overall leadership, the persona and oratory of party presidents played a big role in the 2008 election. Jigmi Y Thinley appealed to the masses and was synonymous with the DPT. Presenting the findings of their study on the knowledge of political parties among Bhutanese voters in 2008 in their book *Drukyul Decides: In the minds of Bhutan's first voters*, Gyambo Sithey and Dr Tandin Dorji observe that “more people knew the president of a party than they knew their own local candidates”.

Their study showed that 41.5 percent of rural respondents said that “presidents were the most important consideration when voting”.

When faced with a new and baffling reality called politics, the party leadership was the most immediate and straightforward yardstick of a party’s strength. CRI’s survey in 2008 showed why most Bhutanese could not think beyond party leadership. It showed that 32.5 percent of civil servants did not know that a losing candidate would not become an MP. And civil servants are thought to be the best educated and informed section of the population. The same study found that only 27.3 percent of the respondents read the manifestoes of the two parties which, anyway, were similar.

In Nubi-Tangsibji constituency in Trongsa where the DPT’s 28-year-old Nidup Zangpo beat 48-year-old Kaentsho Sumpai Dhendup, the voters said that they had chosen the former because he belonged to the DPT. In Thrimshing constituency in Trashigang where 26-year-old Choki Wangmo stood against 48-year-old Dorji Choden, Choki Wangmo’s supporters reportedly promoted the notion that the party president was more important than the candidates. Although a party president may not play as big a role as it did in 2008 election, a crucial part of a party’s public image rests on its president. A case in point is Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa which is seen as a strong party with a weak leadership.

Civil Servants Behind the Scene?

Since the first election in 2008, civil servants have been suspected to influence the vote in rural areas. After a crushing defeat on 24 March, 2008, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) alleged that the support it enjoyed until 21 March began to change after “bus-, car-, and truck-loads of voters from urban areas went to their villages to vote”. The party said that they all “had a common message that they shared with their relatives, friends, and neighbours”.

What the “common message” was not spelt out but bus-loads, car-loads, and truck-loads of voters from urban areas referred to civil servants were thought to have a big influence on their rural cousins. Therefore, a chunk of manifestoes of all the parties has sought to promote the welfare of civil servants, most obviously by increasing their salary and benefits.

However, some analysts refute this as a myth spun by civil servants who want to assert their covert importance in the election processes. Otherwise, as apolitical members of society, their direct influence in the election process is limited.

Instead, rural voters are known to advise their urban relatives on the choice of political candidates. They assert deeper knowledge of the candidates and problems they promise to address. CRI's post-election Rural District Survey and Civil Servant Survey in 2008 seem to support this argument. The first survey revealed that only 5.7 percent of the respondents sought advice on voting decisions. The same survey revealed that 73.3 percent of the voters in rural areas had made their voting decision "months before the election".

Rural and urban voters do not operate on the same wave length. For example, when fresh graduate Sonam Wangchuk stood against two other candidates with impressive career achievements in the 2013 NC election in Mongar, the rural and urban voters looked at them with marked difference.

The urban voters counted experience, education, and maturity in a utilitarian way while their rural cousins vetted the candidates on a humanistic scale. Most rural voters saw Sonam Wangchuk as a humble young man in search of a job and his contestants as privileged individuals who had already enjoyed leadership positions and associated benefits. Naichu, the incumbent and the most experienced candidate, picked up 56.2 percent of postal ballot votes cast mostly by civil servants while Sonam Wangchuk could gather only 22.9 percent of the votes. But the latter secured 41.9 percent of the electronic voting machine votes and won in 10 of the 17 gewogs.

The resounding message was that rural voters make their own choice. A farmer from Tsakaling gewog who voted for Sonam Wangchuk said he and his family wanted to give the young man a good job and a chance for a good life. "Good things must not remain with the privileged lot," he said. We might argue that he is not a discerning voter but he is a democratic citizen speaking his mind.

Name-dropping

Discreetly dropping the name of His Majesty The King during 2008 as well as 2013 National Assembly elections is believed to have swayed many a vote. In 2008, some DPT party workers were reportedly known to position the party as "the King's party", alluding to the party as the Druk Gyalpo's choice.

The tables turned in 2013 when the PDP party workers alluded to their party as the one favoured by His Majesty The King.

Name-dropping also happens at the individual level with some political candidates and their supporters spreading rumours that they enjoyed the blessings of His Majesty The King. With the approach of the third parliamentary election, some candidates or their supporters, will try to garner support by dropping His Majesty The King's name. A few candidates and their supporters are already known to drop hints that they enjoy the support of His Majesty The King.

Dropping His Majesty The King's name in elections is seen as a foolproof political bait for votes as evidenced by two rounds of a mock election held in 2007. The Druk Yellow Party – other fictitious parties are the Druk Blue Party, the Druk Green Party, and the Druk Red Party – which was identified by the yellow colour of His Majesty The King secured 44.30 percent of votes in the primary election and won 46 of the 47 constituencies in the general round.

Appealing to the Masses

The stunning defeat of the PDP led by Sangay Ngedup in 2008 was interpreted that being ordinary, or sounding so, strikes a chord with the masses. In fact, some analysts read the results of the first election as the triumph of the ordinary over the elite. Although the leaders of the DPT did not necessarily represent the ordinary people, they were thought to be less elitist.

The politicians took that message so seriously that the 2013 election campaign and speeches were imbued with direct references or allusions to their humble family backgrounds. Suddenly, all the politicians, including the wealthiest and privileged ones, portrayed themselves as coming from the humblest of families. In a televised debate the four party presidents spent considerable time tracing their humble roots.

A newspaper dubbed the campaign process “*nyamchung* style” (humble style) and caricatured the four presidents with the caption, “It’s all *nyamchung* style this year, believe it or not...”

Every politician in Bhutan will feel the imperative to act and sound humble as long as the ordinary Bhutanese hold sway.

Swing Voters and Foxy Voters

CRI's Rural District Survey revealed that 10.5 percent of the voters were “unable or unwilling” to make a voting decision until polling day. That was 33,439 of 318,465 registered voters. This substantial number of people comprised swing voters, (unpredictable voters) and what I would call “foxy voters”.

Swing voters are those who are unable to make a voting decision and unpredictable voters those who are easily swayed or beguiled. Foxy voters, on the other hand, are a clever group which is neither indecisive nor gullible. They vote for a party or a candidate of their choice but commit their support to many for parasitic gains. In other words, they are political freeloaders. Although there are no studies to suggest the number of foxy voters, a substantial number has been observed in both 2008 and 2013 elections.

Where did we see them? In both 2008 and 2013 elections, a number of parties and candidates ferried urban voters to their constituencies by bus-loads. But it was found out that not all those bus-loads translated into votes for the parties and candidates concerned. A number of them took the ride and enjoyed meals along the way but did not vote for the political benefactor. For example, a gewog in Mongar saw 15 bus-loads of urban voters in the 2013 general election but not all of them voted for the candidate who bore their travel and boarding expenses. They were urban foxy voters.

Rural Bhutan saw its share of foxy voters. They included villagers, including some party workers, who attended all campaign meetings with a smile and availed themselves of whatever came with them, including free meals and goodies.

This group of people was alleged to have “misinformed” the PDP leadership about the party enjoying strong support. The PDP's sense of betrayal was summed up by its Lamgong-Wangchang candidate Kaka Tshering who told Kuensel after conceding defeat: “The main reason we lost is the fact that we were betrayed by our tshogpas [party workers] who, until the last moment, said that we were sure to win.” It is safe to say that the tshogpas had been betrayed by the foxy voters.

A veteran political candidate who is on a familiarisation trip to the east says the Bhutanese voters in the villages have become “double-faced” which poses the biggest challenge to certainty in politics.

What Does the Average Bhutanese Voter Look Like?

While the above characteristics describe the Bhutanese voters in broad brushstrokes, the average Bhutanese voter is far more sophisticated. Unrestrained by ideological positions and leanings, sophisticated campaign machinery, or opinion polls, he or she enjoys the freedom to be influenced by – or not at all influenced by – an array of factors, including some that are deeply personal or social.

For the average voter academic qualification and career experience do not always count, particularly when there are strong social and family compulsions. He or she can be too uninhibited and independent-minded to be a discerning voter. He or she can also be too credulous and gullible to be a discerning voter. But, like the political landscape, the voter is bound to change and adapt to change.