

# The Micro Effect of Democratisation in Rural Bhutan

*Strained Community Relations*

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## Introduction

Bhutan made its transition from an absolute Monarchy to a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy in 2008. Since then, I have noticed a change in the community relations among rural voters in my own community in Radhi-Sakteng, in eastern Bhutan.

The Radhi-Sakteng constituency has four gewogs<sup>1</sup>: Radhi, Phongmey, Merak and Sakteng gewogs (blocks). The majority of the people in this constituency have experienced changes in their relations: Some people have developed strong community ties, while some have very limited interaction among themselves. Voters in Merak and Sakteng have become highly polarised along party lines.

Witnessing this motivated me to study the cause of party polarisation among rural voters. I was particularly concerned about the disruptions in society's regular trends of friendship, social networking, and cooperation after the transition to democracy.

Since Bhutan bases its development index on the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) — which aims to balance the materialistic with the spiritual well-being of the people — understanding the impact of democratisation on community relationships is a matter of both national and theoretical importance.

Conducting field work in the Radhi-Sakteng constituency in the summer of 2013 enabled me to develop a plausible explanation for why the rural voters have become polarised along party lines in Merak and Sakteng, but not in Radhi and Phongmey.

My research suggests that a higher level of modernisation and development in the rural areas facilitates more peaceful democratisation than in areas that

<sup>1</sup> A *gewog* is a local administration and consists of several villages. Several *gewogs* form a “geographic administrative unit known as Dzongkhag (district)”-wikipedia

have experienced less modernisation or development. To better understand this, I did field work on the overall community relationships of the rural voters under the Radhi-Sakteng constituency, where I grew up.

I noticed a variation in party polarisation among the voters. Democratisation has enforced division among the rural voters in some communities. Rural voters are polarised along party lines where the local party workers create political partisanship among voters.

Going by the National Happiness Index, measuring the spiritual well-being of people in a new political system has become vitally important for the government. Therefore, studying why some party workers have greater capacity to polarise rural voters in some communities, while other party workers are less successful in polarising communities, is essential to understand the trend of Bhutanese democracy.

## Theory

Existing literature does not explain the puzzle of variability in party polarisation among voters in rural Bhutan. The literature on democracy discusses the prerequisites of democratisation, but Bhutan does not have the necessary prerequisites to facilitate a good transition to democracy.

According to Przeworski, prerequisites of democratisation, such as high per capita income, “years of schooling”, and the kind of democratic institution, determine the “survival” of democracy in the country.<sup>2</sup> Eva Bellin also mentions strong civil society, democratic neighbours, and democratic culture as possibly being the prerequisites of democracy.<sup>3</sup> This is because a collective force of the civil society keeps government accountable for its performances in the country.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the democratic neighbour and high literacy are also found to be the prerequisites of the transition or the sustainability of democracy.<sup>5</sup> To sum up, according to these scholars, if a country either has a high income per capita, high literacy rate, a strong civil society or has a democratic neighbour, the probability of the survival of democracy is high.

2 Adam Przeworski, “Democracy and Economic Development”, *Political Science and Public Interest*: 9-11

3 Eva Bellin, “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East; Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective.” *Comparative Politics* (2004): 141

4 Bellin, “The Robustness of Authoritarianism...”: 139-141

5 Daron Acemoglu et al, “From Education to Democracy”, *National Bureau of Economic Research* (2005): 1  
Bellin, “The Robustness of Authoritarianism...”: 139-141

Bhutan does not have a high literacy rate or high income per capita: 66.7 percent of the Bhutanese population are in rural areas and the majority of them are illiterate. According to the Bhutan poverty analysis 2012, the literacy rate of the poor persons in Bhutan is 52 percent, against the 65 percent of the non-poor persons.<sup>6</sup> Bhutan also does not have a high income per capita, despite having increased its Foreign Direct Investment.

In contrast, Bhutan emphasises Gross National Happiness (GNH), introduced by His Majesty The Fourth King, which aims to balance the materialistic and the spiritual well-being of the people.<sup>7</sup>

With quicker development on one hand, and party polarisation on the other, rural parts of Bhutan require a different theory to explain this puzzle. My research suggests that development-based explanation would elucidate the variation in party polarisation across the rural communities, based on the case study from the Radhi-Sakteng constituency.

Because of the social changes, I was motivated to conduct fieldwork in the Radhi-Sakteng constituency in the summer of 2013. This was because it would be easier to carry out a comparative analysis of Radhi and Phongmey vis-à-vis Merak and Sakteng. These communities differ in their culture, geographical location, and occupations, but fall under one constituency.

While the residents of Radhi and Phongmey are farmers, those from Merak and Sakteng are semi-nomadic (highlanders), raising yaks and sheep. The former two are geographically located at lowlands, in contrast to Merak and Sakteng, which are located above 3500m and 2800m.

Moreover, my familiarity with the Sakteng community and its people, culture, and traditions, while doing two summer projects in 2011 and 2012, would contribute to a better understanding of the situation. Therefore, my findings discuss reasons for the variations of party polarisation among voters under the Radhi-Sakteng constituency.

## Result and Analysis

My research suggests that a lower level of development and the herder occupation cause variations in party polarisation in the Radhi-Sakteng constituency. A lower level of development has created power inequalities that gave local party workers — the tshogpas — more socio-economic power in

<sup>6</sup> *Bhutan Poverty Analysis 2012* (2013): 17

<sup>7</sup> Gellenkamp, "Democracy in Bhutan;...": 8

polarising rural voters in some communities, but not in other communities of the Radhi-Sakteng constituency. This section will present evidence from my field research to assess my hypotheses.

## Explanations

### **Hypothesis 1: Lower Levels of Modernisation Increase the Duration (and Level) of Party Polarisation**

Party polarisation in Radhi and Phongmey seem to be less than in Merak and Sakteng due to socio-economic development and farming occupation.

Firstly, Radhi and Phongmey saw early development with exposure to modern facilities, like schools and roads, which seems to explain the lower levels of party polarisation among the voters in these communities. As a majority of the local leaders thought, self-empowerment through better development, and increased modern facilities and infrastructures, would explain the weaker power hierarchy in Radhi and Phongmey.<sup>8</sup>

As I observed, people in Radhi and Phongmey have been more economically independent for the past 10 to 15 years, due to more access to modern facilities such as roads, electricity, technology, and mobile connectivity. Building farm roads first in Radhi and Phongmey — because of their closeness to the district centre and the capital — has improved the productivity of local farmers as they can now use modern farming technologies and hybrid seedlings.<sup>9</sup>

This higher agricultural productivity through modern technologies and modernisation have helped people escape poverty as they no longer have to do underpaid work.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Radhi is believed to have a high literacy rate and many educated people, because of access to schools in the 1960s, before other gewogs in Trashigang district.<sup>11</sup> As a result, tshogpas (party workers) from these gewogs do not seem to have much power in manipulating voters through monetary or power hierarchy, unlike those in Merak and Sakteng.

The facilities have given voters from Radhi and Phongmey more opportunities to interact with political leaders, candidates and government officials, and access to information sources. This has increased the knowledge of democracy among rural voters in these communities.<sup>12</sup> For example, one of my interviewees

8 Interview; Mangmi, Dungzhay, Farmer, Tshogpa; 26<sup>th</sup> July Radhi, 29<sup>th</sup> July Radhi; 1<sup>st</sup> August; on the way to Merak

9 Interview: Tshogpa; 1<sup>st</sup> August; on the way to Merak

10 Interview; Mangmi; 26<sup>th</sup> July; Radhi

11 Wangdi, Tempa. "Radhipas due for a four-way split-up." Kuensel Online 13<sup>th</sup> May 2013

12 Interview; Mangmi, Dungzhay; 24<sup>th</sup> July Phongmey, 26<sup>th</sup> July Radhi

said his knowledge of democracy had improved through various awareness programmes on television, and interactions with party candidates.<sup>13</sup>

Most of the local leaders from Radhi and Phongmey also believed that rural people have better understood democracy in terms of individual rights and the democratic process, including political campaigns and party candidates.<sup>14</sup> According to local leaders from Radhi and Phongmey, people have become critical thinkers, and are less fearful of local and national politicians, as democracy gives them the power to raise their voices and to elect their own candidates.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, people from Merak and Sakteng have only recently been introduced to better lifestyles because of modernisation since 2008. Due to higher altitudes and extreme remoteness, these communities have only recently received modern facilities and technologies, such as electricity,<sup>16</sup> mobile connectivity, better toilets and safe drinking water,<sup>17</sup> and awareness programmes, especially on education and health.<sup>18</sup>

The first elected Member of Parliament Jigme Tsheltrum — also the Speaker of the National Assembly at the time — initiated a road construction project to both Merak and Sakteng, which have reached more than half way to these communities. As a result, cars have come to Merak over the last few years.<sup>19</sup> The living standards have also improved with the cancellation of 120 days *woolag*<sup>20</sup>, unpaid community services, that had deprived them of income.

Nonetheless, these recent developments seem to have created and reinforced power inequalities among people in Merak and Sakteng. A number of public contract-based projects also increased because of increased development projects in these communities<sup>21</sup>, but only the higher social status groups seem to take advantage of these opportunities. Modernisation appears to have given literate and higher socio-economic status people more opportunities, while the poorer are just starting to escape poverty.

In my observations over the last three summer breaks, power hierarchy still exists in these communities as literate people become more knowledgeable while the poor are still uneducated and dependent on the tshogpas or party workers for information.

13 Interview; Tshogpa; 29<sup>th</sup> July, Radhi

14 Interview; Gup, Community Tshogpa, Mangmi, Gup, Tshogpa; 24<sup>th</sup> July, Phongmey, 29<sup>th</sup> July, Radhi

15 Interview; Mangmi, Tshogpa; 24<sup>th</sup> July Phongmey, 29<sup>th</sup> July Radhi

16 Contributed by Kuensel, RAO Information. “Electricity expected to reach the highland areas.”

17 Interview; Community Tshogpa, Farmer; 2<sup>nd</sup> August, Merak, 5<sup>th</sup> August, Radhi

18 Contributed by Kuensel, RAO Information. “Development trends.”

19 Interview; farmer, Radhi

20 *Woolag*: free community services by each household for the benefit of whole community

21 Interview; Mangmi; 6<sup>th</sup> August; Sakteng

I noticed that tshogpas are either literate or from a higher socio-economic status, or are good at public speaking. This explains their influence on communities. Therefore, the late development in Merak and Sakteng, especially during the political transition in the country, has further enforced inequalities among different socio-economic groups.

This power hierarchy seems to have given tshogpas in Merak and Sakteng more power to manipulate voters' political behaviour. Most interviewees from Merak and Sakteng acknowledged that a majority of the voters from their communities were polarised by the tshogpas' behaviour and corruption during political campaigns.<sup>22</sup> The tshogpas spread rumours and criticism of other parties' governments during political campaigns, to manipulate voters' political leanings, ultimately leading to disputes among some voters.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, "wealthy and talkative" tshogpas persuaded voters to join their party or forced them to support their party.<sup>24</sup> There were even cases of tshogpas deliberately creating disputes and filing cases against voters if they did not support their parties.<sup>25</sup> Many interviewees explained that the voters' poor understanding of democracy and political campaigns also made them listen only to "educated people" or tshogpas, thus subjecting themselves to the tshogpas' rumours and gossip<sup>26</sup>. People seemed to be brainwashed by the tshogpas, leading to disputes, quarrels, and polarisation.<sup>27</sup>

My research suggests that differences in people's occupations can also be one of the causes for a variation in party polarisation among rural voters in the Radhi-Sakteng constituency. Farmers from Radhi have become more self-sufficient and economically independent, and have developed strong community ties. Radhi is known as the "rice bowl of the country's largest dzongkhag."<sup>28</sup>

Farmers in this gewog were once living from hand to mouth<sup>29</sup>, but they now sell their products to the rest of the country. Group work and village activities have developed community ties. On the other hand, the semi-nomadic lifestyle of people from Merak and Sakteng has limited social interactions, which might explain the weaker community relationships.

22 Interview; Tshogpa, Community Tshogpa, Civil Servant, Mangmi, 2 Community Tshogpas, Gup, Mangmi; 2<sup>nd</sup> August; Merak, 6<sup>th</sup> August, Sakteng, 3<sup>rd</sup> August, Sakteng, 4<sup>th</sup> August, Sakteng, 6<sup>th</sup> August, Sakteng

23 Interview; Community Tshogpa, Civil Servant, Mangmi, 2. Community Tshogpas, Tshogpa; 2<sup>nd</sup> August, Merak; 7<sup>th</sup> August, Sakteng; 29<sup>th</sup> July, Radhi,

24 Interview; Mangmi; 6<sup>th</sup> August; Sakteng

25 Interview; Mangmi; 6<sup>th</sup> August; Sakteng

26 Interview; Mangmi; 6<sup>th</sup> August; Sakteng

27 Interview; Community Tshogpa; 7<sup>th</sup> August; Sakteng

28 Rai, Kuensel, 2003

29 Interview; Mangmi; 26<sup>th</sup> July; Radhi

## Hypothesis II: Herders Experience a Higher Level of Party Polarisation Than Farmers

### II a. *Group farming and cultural activities keep communities in Radhi and Phongmey connected*

The occupational nature of farming and yak herding explain the difference between party polarisation of those from Radhi and Phongmey and those from Merak and Sakteng.

Firstly, the nature of farming and group activities seem to have kept the voters from Radhi connected and dependent on each other. As I grew up in this community, I know that farmers from both gewogs do group farming, in which four to seven households work on a rotational basis to share labour and other farming tools and animals. My interviewees from Radhi explained that continuing this practice of group farming has helped them increase cooperation among villagers because they work together for approximately six to seven months in a year.<sup>30</sup>

According to some interviewees this group work has been continuing for five to seven years<sup>31</sup>. Government incentives such as free imported saplings and the nature of working together, based on interests and cooperation, have kept them connected.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, the *Shinang Tshogpa* has been formed among neighbouring villages to help families during the death of a member.<sup>33</sup> The *Shinang Tshogpa* is a committee formed in the villages to provide emergency help through contributions of rice and cash from each household during the cremation of the deceased.<sup>34</sup> This especially helps the poor who cannot afford to cremate deceased members and it also contributes labour, especially during the busy agricultural season.<sup>35</sup> Such gatherings at the home of a bereaved family also provide local people or voters the space to cooperate, communicate, and develop ties and community relationships.

Finally, regular religious rituals in the community have kept rural voters in Radhi less polarised. Each community has its own Buddhist temples and *lhakbangs*<sup>36</sup> where the communities rotationally organise religious ceremonies on auspicious days, at least five religious times a year.<sup>37</sup>

30 Interview; Village Monk, 2 Farmer; 27<sup>th</sup> July, Radhi

31 Interview; 2 Farmers; 27<sup>th</sup> July, Radhi, 29<sup>th</sup> July, Radhi

32 Interview; Village Monk, Farmer; 27<sup>th</sup> July, Radhi

33 Interview; Farmer, Village Monk, Farmer, Shopkeeper; 27<sup>th</sup> July, Radhi, 29<sup>th</sup> July, Radhi

34 Interview; Farmer, Village Monk; 27<sup>th</sup> July, Radhi

35 Interview; 2 Farmers, Shopkeeper; 27<sup>th</sup> July, Radhi, 29<sup>th</sup> July, Radhi

36 *Lhakbang*: it is also like a temple, but it belongs to whole community members.

37 Interview; 6 Farmers; 22<sup>nd</sup> July, Radhi, 27<sup>th</sup> July, Radhi, 29<sup>th</sup> July, Radhi

All community members have to pay *Dhoolang* which is a contribution to religious activities in the form of grains, money and physical labour<sup>38</sup>. Hence, community religious programmes appear to have kept community members associated, which would explain the less party polarisation among the voters in Radhi.

### ***IIb. Semi-nomadic lifestyles of Merak and Sakteng communities provided limited space for social interactions***

On the other hand, the semi-nomadic lifestyles of people from Merak and Sakteng would explain their less social interaction, compared with that of the voters from Radhi. The main income-generating occupation of people from both Merak and Sakteng is yak herding. They move to the high mountains in summer and to the lowlands in winter to graze their herds.<sup>39</sup> During my summer projects in 2011 and 2012 in Sakteng, and my visit to Merak in 2013, I observed them living in their homes in Sakteng or Merak only for about one or two months during seasonal movements. Yak herding is mostly an individual household or a family activity.

This herding lifestyle and seasonal movement give them less time and space to interact with their neighbours. The people and students told me that not many people stay in their homes in the villages of Sakteng and Merak in the winters. Semi-nomads usually stay in their own individual pasture land, herding their cattle.

Through my visits to Sakteng every summer since 2011, I observed that they stay in their community only in summer, to participate in festivals, elections, and other village activities. Thus, voters who are polarised by the tshogpas have less interaction and are further separated from their neighbours. Moreover, individual households trade with their partners in India or with their neighbouring places, such as Radhi and Phongmey, and are less dependent on their community members than the farmers in Radhi and Phongmey. This explains the higher level of party polarisation among the semi-nomadic voters.

## **Alternative Hypotheses**

However, there are also some alternative hypotheses that could explain the variation in party polarisation in these four gewogs. The leadership of tshogpas and the voters' loyalty towards their parties also explain why some rural voters in Radhi-Sakteng constituency are more polarised. Vocal tshogpas seem to

38 Interview; Farmer; 29<sup>th</sup> July, Radhi

39 Bhutan & Beyond: Bhutan Nepal India Tibet. "Merak&Sakteng Trek-6 ays/ 5 nights."

have played a major role in party polarisation in Merak and Sakteng. As one of my interviewees stated, some wealthy and talkative tshogpas are very good at convincing voters about their parties.<sup>40</sup> Many voters explained that most tshogpas from these gewogs create rumours about the other parties and manipulate voters' political behaviour.

Secondly, the voters' party loyalty and the achievements of previous Members of Parliament would explain a variation in party polarisation across the four gewogs in the Radhi-Sakteng constituency.

The division along party lines is very prominent during political campaigns when voters segregate themselves from other party supporters. For the 2013 election, I noticed less interaction between party supporters of two parties that qualified for the general election, especially in the meetings held by the party candidates. This partisanship seems to be the cause of suspicions, rumours and disputes, as there is a communication gap between the voters of the two parties. Moreover, voters in Merak show visible support for their party candidates.<sup>41</sup> The achievements of MPs in bringing developments to his constituency also seem to explain the party loyalty of most voters.

## Conclusion

Despite having brought effective community development, democratisation in rural Bhutan has created divisions among voters. Since the literature on the prerequisites of democratisation does not explain party polarisation in rural Bhutan, I came up with a developmental-based explanation for a variation in party polarisation in the Radhi-Sakteng constituency.

Some rural voters are concerned about losing their cultural, religious and traditional values, and also about the rise of political chaos, because of party polarisation during the country's first two elections.

Thus, this research suggests that the Government of Bhutan needs to think of national policies, awareness programmes, or education on democracy to reduce or prevent party polarisation and political disputes in future elections. My interviewees recommend that national policy makers and the Election Commission of Bhutan consider policies for preventing party polarisation by candidates and party workers, especially by tshogpas, during political campaigns.

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40 Interview; Mangmi; 6<sup>th</sup> August, Sakteng

41 Interview; Civil Servant; 2<sup>nd</sup> August; Merak

Nevertheless, this research also gives an insight into prerequisites for democratisation in rural areas where the development-based explanation model could be applied to party polarisation — a rural-urban and farmers-herders divide.

The current literature — such as on a farmers-herders conflict in Nigeria — explains the structural and religious factors, and the scarcity of resources, or political conflict, as the causes of conflict between people of different occupations and location, but future researchers could consider looking into developmental-based explanations, and accordingly promote policies for the sustainability of peace and order in societies.

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