

Some Impact of Democratic Politics in Bhutan

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Democratic transition is usually a process of successive developments. Such was the case in Bhutan. Taking into account the context - the point from which it took off and the environment in which it took shape - where every initiative to modernise the country has emanated from the Kings.

Did democracy really begin with the country going to the polls to elect parliamentarians in 2008? Why was there a huge opposition to the idea of democracy? What have the political parties and their supporters done to the generally docile rural populace? How has Bhutan changed post-democracy? These are some of the questions that this article will attempt to answer.

Even before Bhutanese went to the polls to elect MPs to the National Assembly and National Council the process of democratisation was in effect. Bhutanese elected their gups, mangmis, and tshogpas for decades. Therefore the idea of elections to most of the electorate was not really new.

Bhutanese had more faith in the sagacity of their King than in the accountability of their untried political Parties. And it was the Monarchy that ensured smooth transition to democracy without any pressure from forces within or outside its territory.

If Bhutan's democracy is unique in originating with the ruler and not as a result of the outcry of unhappy subjects, the laws which frame it makes it even more so. For example, rules that require candidates to have at least a university degree and religious persons not being entitled to vote.

In the run up to the elections, there were exchanges of vitriolic allegations and mudslinging. People seemed to take the elections with such passion, conviction, and earnestness that, in some places, friends and family were divided along political lines.

Almost a decade after the first democratically elected leaders took office, obvious signs of scars of the well-intended change in governance are visible.

People are Spoilt and Confused

The electorate has become spoilt. NC aspirants and politicians acknowledge that voters and supporters ask for favours like recharging their mobile phones. Some say such behavior has emerged from the practice of pledging to support every need during the campaigns. The politicians or those standing for elections need to be responsible enough to promise only what is needed and possible.

Before 2008, the year of the first democratic elections, people contributed labour while government provided the funding to procure materials for development activities. “Today, people would not even clear a drain blockage and expect the government to do it for them,” says a former chimi, Namgay Phuntsho.

Other local leaders and critics said that the culture of freebies, which the political Parties have promulgated over the years, is detrimental to the health of the economy albeit it benefits to the political parties themselves.

Did the parties then benefit a few and harm the interests of many?

Former Chief Justice Sonam Tobgye said that this is expected to happen initially. But, as the citizens mature, such populist moves will be difficult. “The good thing about people making demands is that the government will be forced to make money which would indirectly help in boosting the economy and create opportunities for the people,” he said.

One of the side effects of democracy has been the division it has created among the individuals, families, and communities based on the Parties or individual candidates they support. “Bhutan is a small country and the ripple effect is huge and damaging to the country’s peace and harmony,” says one active politician.

Meanwhile, worried about being branded with one party or another, civil servants try to avoid politicians in towns and other public space to avoid being tagged with parties or politicians specially when elections draw close or during elections.

The advent of democracy ushered in numerous developments to further enhance the living standard of the Bhutanese. The growth of the civil society organisations and the media, among others, helped bring about better awareness and consciousness among the citizenry of their roles and responsibilities.

An Exception to Bhutanese

One quality, which distinguishes and is an exception in the Bhutanese democracy, is that the devolution of power is a “gift” from the Golden Throne. Against the plea of his people and to their awe, His Majesty The Fourth Druk Gyalpo, at the age of 51, abdicated to make way for then Crown Prince, Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck. His Majesty The Fourth King was at the peak of his 34 years of reign when he relinquished the Throne. His Majesty The Fourth Druk Gyalpo had 14 years left to step down. The Constitution of Kingdom of Bhutan requires a King to abdicate only at the age of 65 years.

“His abdication was not triggered by any crisis. It was neither a consequence of military coup, internal uprising, international pressure, nor usurpation by his successor. It was voluntary.” (Monarchy and Democracy in 21st Century). Decentralisation and democratisation for Bhutan, however, was not an abrupt devolution of power. It was a steady process planned arduously spanning nearly 30 years under the visionary leadership of His Majesty The Fourth Druk Gyalpo. The process took its birth from the Throne.

Dasho Dr Sonam Kinga in his article in the book “Monarchy and Democracy in The 21st Century argues that the democratic transition in Bhutan was not triggered by the conventional causes that scholars of democratic transition theories identify. One of the democratic transition theories being the structuralist theory, which states, “only a country that attempts a transition to democracy when it has per capita GDP of USD 3,000-6,000”.

But Dasho Dr Sonam Kinga argues that Bhutan did not fulfill such preconditions when it embarked on democracy. In fact he disputes that Bhutan’s per capita GDP in 2006 - when it embraced democracy - was only USD 1,321, which was much lower than the criteria the structuralists set. At the time when Bhutan transitioned to democracy, more than 68 percent of its population also languished with subsistence farming. Over 30 percent of its population lived under the poverty line.

Furthermore, Dasho argues that Bhutanese democracy cannot be identified to conventional causes of transition to democracy since none of the factors cited really is applicable to Bhutan’s transition to democracy. None of the factors such as loss of legitimacy, authoritarian development, free values, the rise of civil society or external factors like peaceful pressure, democracy assistance, or democratisation by force, and regional factors played any lead in Bhutan’s peaceful transition to democratic culture. (Monarchy and Democracy in 21st Century).

The Rule of Law

Democracy without rule of law can lead to lawlessness. Lack of institutions and conventions are some of the notable reasons behind the rise of unruliness in some of the world's biggest democracies.

Being the world's youngest democracy, Bhutan had the opportunity to use the experiences and lessons from these older democracies to offset similar circumstances. His Majesty The Fourth Druk Gyalpo, during the drafting of the Constitution, said that the Constitution must go beyond mere words to support and enable the political system to safeguard the sovereignty of the country and rights of the people.

“...The Constitution must embody the expectations and aspirations of the people, and draw on the wisdom of the existing system and laws, and the lessons learned by other countries around the world...Checks and balances must be framed so that no person or organisation will be able to misuse power and authority to undermine the principles of freedom and individual rights enshrined in the Constitution... To ensure the continued prosperity, security, and well-being of our nation, we must have a Constitution that will ensure rule of law, encourage political morality and give us a political system that will provide good governance and fulfill the aspirations of the Bhutanese people.” (The Constitution of Bhutan: Principles and Philosophies by Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye).

Accordingly the Constitution, adopted in 2008, not only ensured people the rights, freedom, and correlative responsibilities, but provide the concepts of good governance of sustainable and equitable development. The principles of administrative law, justice, free and fair elections for the formation of the government are also strongly reflected in the Constitution.

Independent institutions, as mandated by the Constitution were established to ensure and strengthen the rule of law. Independent Constitutional bodies such as Anti-Corruption Commission, Royal Audit Authority, Royal Civil Service Commission, and the Election Commission of Bhutan were established to prevent the political forces from altering the legal and institutional framework for their short-term and personal gains.

“The Constitution defines various institutions through which power is to be exercised and specifies roles that the institutions are to perform...The Constitution provides carefully crafted checks and balances. The Constitution prevents power from being fragmented... These matters are addressed

through well defined roles for the central and local governments, through the functional separation of powers between the three arms of the government and through the institutional separation of the political party and other entities and processes.” (The Constitution of Bhutan: Principles and Philosophies by Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye).

While it is still debatable whether the change in the form of government has led to improved public service delivery initiatives were made to introduce a number of programmes to ensure fast and responsive services. Over 114 Government to Citizen Services (G2C) were introduced to improve and provide speedier services. A number of services like audit, security, passport, education, thromde (municipal) services, and G2C online payment are still offered even now. eKaaSel, which is a feedback and grievance redressal system was added only recently to the list to improve the public service.

Growth of Civil Society

Although most Bhutanese still do not understand civic education or roles and responsibilities of a citizen, efforts have been made to strengthen civil society, which is one of the vitals of a healthy democracy. Since the establishment of the Civil Society Organisation Act in 2007 and subsequent birth of Civil Society Organisation Authority (CSOA) in 2009, steady growth in the number of civil society organisations, mostly homegrown, has been observed.

From just one CSO, National Youth Association of Bhutan in 1973, there are 50 CSOs registered with the CSOA today. These CSOs provide services in various fields including, poverty reduction, rehabilitation, empowerment of women and children, media, environment, and health and hygiene. A number of the CSOs have also been providing medical care and shelter to stray animals with one or two also engaging in release of slaughter-bound animals.

For their selfless service and civic action to the nation, His Majesty The King awarded 22 CSOs the highest level of recognition - National Order of Merit (Gold) - in December, 2016.

The CSO Act of Bhutan is moulded to suit the perceived needs of the Bhutanese democracy. That’s why, in the Bhutanese context of the CSO, the Act does not include constituents like labour unions, religious institutions, and political parties, which are accepted according to international norms.

Media

Despite the weak state the media is in now it goes without saying that the Bhutanese media has come far, or attempts have been made. As Bhutan prepared for parliamentary democracy, the media were encouraged to prepare for their watchdog role with the licensing of two private newspapers - Bhutan Times and Bhutan Observer in 2006.

Until then Kuensel was the only newspaper and Bhutan Broadcasting Service was the only radio station. Television and Internet were only introduced in 1999. But since then there has been a proliferation of media including newspapers, books, films, music, and social media. While BBS remains the only television station, radio stations have expanded over the years. The country today has six radio stations: BBS Radio, Kuzoo FM, Radio Valley, Centennial Radio, Radio Waves, and Yiga Radio.

But the growth of media hasn't been limited only to numbers. Over the years the media has often been lambasted for lack of professionalism but they haven't fallen short when it comes to playing the watchdog role. One such story, which really shifted the public perception was the "Gyalpoizhing Land Case", which went on to disqualify two of the former government's key ministerial candidates in the 2013 elections following their involvement in the land case.

Discussion on media is incomplete today without the inclusion of social media. Social media in Bhutan, like in the rest of the world, is replacing the mainstream media in many ways. While the mainstream media seems to languish under a number of financial and circumstantial reasons, social media have become informal platforms for people to express themselves about corruption, politics, leaders, issues, and even news, with little or no censorship.

But the onslaught of unregulated information on social media also put people in disadvantaged and often in untoward situations. Accordingly, media literacy has been introduced to offset the ill-effects of social media and its information that often come in the form of hate speech, cyber bully, stalking, fake news, and online predators targeting the young and the innocent. Media literacy programmes are initiated to enable young, old, and the illiterate populace to be smart consumers of information through critical thinking. The government spent Nu 3 Million for Media and Information Literacy to the public, schools, and capacity development of the teacher trainees." (State of the Nation Report, June 2017).

Constitutional Bodies

Corruption blights many democracies in the world. Three years before Bhutan transitioned to democracy, His Majesty The Fourth King decreed the institution of ACC, in 2005, to prevent and combat corruption: “With the rapid pace of economic development in our country, there have been changes in the thinking of the people with the influence of self-interest leading to corrupt practices taking place in both the government and the private sector. At a time when we are establishing parliamentary democracy in the country, it is very important to curb and root out corruption from the very beginning. Therefore, it is imperative to establish the office of the Anti-Corruption Commission before the adoption of the Constitution to effectively carry out its functions and responsibilities.”

In its endeavour to eliminate corruption, ACC has been handling a number of cases every year. Between 2006-2015, ACC has assigned 185 cases for investigations (ACC Annual Report 2016). With the same period, ACC also handled over 632 cases that qualified for investigations.

Bhutan has also improved in terms of global Corruption Perception Index (CPI). Bhutan’s rank as least corrupted country improved to 26th in 2017 of the total 180 countries (acc.org.bt). In 2012, Bhutan was ranked 33rd cleanest, which moved up to 27th in 2015. Bhutan has also been ranked 6th cleanest country in the Asia-Pacific region and remains the cleanest in South Asia.

Royal Audit Authority (RAA) as an organisation enshrined with the power in the Constitution to ensure the effective and efficient use of the limited resources has completed 493 audits; 34 are under progress; 293 audit reports and 676 follow-up reports have been issued; and 204 reports are being finalised... RAA recovered Nu 77.451 Million as audit recoveries last year. The RAA launched its Strategic Plan 2015-2020 and Operational plan 2015-2020 on 27 July, 2016. (State of the Nation Report, June 2017)

ECB successfully conducted the first and second parliamentary and National Council elections in 2008 and 2013 respectively and second Local Government elections in 2016. The commission now is in the process of conducting the third parliamentary elections to ensure that the people can exercise their suffrage to elect the government periodically at the end of every five years.

Conclusion

Democracy began with the devolution of power through the establishment of National Assembly and similar institutions some decades ago. This process gained pace in the run up to the first parliamentary elections.

Before this, the elections to the *Lodre Tshogde* gave a taste of what could elections concoct for the generally gullible populace. Days before the election day, some former representatives recall, chimis were invited to large dinners and the word is that when it is done, each one would be handed an envelope discreetly with a plea to vote for the host.

There were other times when individuals, including senior civil servants, were branded as being a supporter one party or another, which has given way to many misunderstandings.

Such incidents have made Bhutanese aware of the risks and potential of party politics. Voters now know the mandates of politicians, to what extent they can deliver. On the other hand, those standing for elections cannot fool their constituents with promises of building bridges, making roads and hospitals. They know in time these will come.

Bhutanese democracy needs time to fine-tune itself to sieve out the bad characteristics. While democracy might have divided families, communities, and nation, it certainly isn't devoid of the positives. Bhutan's advantage as a democracy lies in the fact that it is young and is in a better position to learn from the mistakes of the bigger and older democracies. But the difficulty of the Bhutanese democracy lies not in the democratic institution but in nurturing a culture of democracy.