

## **Causes and Conditions of Bhutan's Democratic Transition\***

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### **Introduction**

After more than two and a half centuries of ecclesiocratic rule and one hundred years of absolute monarchy, Bhutan became democracy in 2008. This historic event was preceded by abdication of the Fourth Majesty in 2006. It is often described as one of the most peaceful democratic transitions in modern history without any role for internal crisis or external pressure. Rather than the people demanding democracy from the king, the latter voluntarily sacrificed his absolute power to empower his subjects for future peace and wellbeing. Mieko Nishimizu (2008) wrote, "The world, after all, had never known a monarch who not only spearheaded political reforms to democracy, but also chose to abdicate the throne on his own terms – at the peak of popularity, in the fullest of his time" (p. xi). It was for the first time in world history that a monarch had voluntarily surrendered his powers and eventually abdicated the throne with no other reasons than pursuing political reforms for the sake of the kingdom and the people (Mathou, 2008).

However, it must be noted that democracy did not come overnight; it is rather the final fruit of more than 50 years of political reforms initiated by the monarchs. The reforms were made smooth and successful by the nature of traditional

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Bhutanese political and social structure, which was fundamentally democratic and egalitarian.

Bhutan's peaceful democratic transition could be understood better by placing in context of its long history of democratic culture and value, which I would distinguish as 'quasi-republican' period of the ecclesiocracy (diarchy or dual system) with a system of electing desi or civilian rulers for a three-year term. The political power during the pre-1616 period, i.e., before the introduction of ecclesiocracy in 1651, was highly dispersed and the society egalitarian, but it was the introduction of ecclesiocracy in 1651 that centralized political powers. According to Tashi Wangchuk (2004), there was an inherent tension between the people and the government because "village society is fundamentally democratic" while the modern Bhutanese nation-state, based on the rationalized top-down Western bureaucratic model, is not. He located this village-state tension as a potential for a genuine democratic development and bridging the "gap between the people and the government" (pp. 844-845). What he meant by "fundamentally democratic" is that the village society is "egalitarian and democratic in its organization and function" and in valuing justice, equality, and liberty (p. 840). Decisions affecting the community were made in *zomdu* (village meeting) attended by a member from every household.

One major characteristics of the Bhutanese traditional society is the consensus politics that prevented the emergence of factional politics (Mathou, 2008). However, the subsequent experience with ecclesiocracy, especially after the death of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in 1651 led to power fragmentation between the centre mainly represented by Druk Desis and regional governors. The system produced 55 Druk Desis (civilian rulers) and 49 Je Khenpos (religious heads). While the heads of state were appointed through a Bhutanese equivalent of divine right to rule principle in the forms of reincarnations of Zhabdrung himself, of his son and Gyalsay Tenzin Rabgye, the instrumental powers were vested in the

hands of Druk Desis and regional governors, mainly *penlops* of Trongsa, Paro and Dagana, and *dzongpons* of Punakha, Punakha, and Thimphu. Finally, two and a half centuries of chaotic rule of ecclesiocracy gave way to monarchy in 1907.

One reason the Tibetans referred to Bhutan and other southern frontier regions by a derogatory term *monyul* (dark land, i.e., without the light of Buddha's teachings), like the anthropological Other, was the absence of hierarchy between the ruler and subjects. Before its unification, valleys or regions of western Bhutan were largely autonomous despite being under strict religious laws of different traditions of the Tibetan Buddhism, particularly that of the Lhasas. Under the religio-political institution called *cho-yon* (priest-patron) introduced by the Lhasas, common people (patrons) provided material support to priests (lama) in return for spiritual support. Lhasa lamas were content with people's spiritual loyalty and patronage to support and perpetuate their lineage teachings and did not interfere in day-to-day secular matters. Thus, anarchy rather than hierarchy was the defining characteristic of political and social milieu. Even after the unification of Bhutan in 1650s and replacement of decentralized social structure with hierarchal and centralized social order, communities enjoyed a high level of autonomy.

The traditional Bhutanese polity, particularly the ecclesiocracy, was highly centralized in imposing tax and labour service and in maintaining the security of the state, but there was little state presence in other areas (Karma Ura, 2005). The individual leaders ensure there was a check and balance system, like the tri-partite separation of powers among executive, legislation and judiciary of the modern nation-state by realizing and internalizing three qualities: *mkhyen pa'i ye shes* (wisdom and compassion), *brtse ba'i thugs rje* (immeasurable loving-kindness) *nus pa'i stobs* (power of strength) (p. 6). This triad of knowledge, loving kindness and power (*mkhyen brtse nus gsum*) is a necessary quality any leader must possess. Right balance of these qualities prevented

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degeneration of leadership into despotism: power was tempered by loving kindness and compassion; too much focus on compassion was tempered by power.

Along the similar line, Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse (2010) discusses three indispensable qualities of a Buddhist spiritual master: “to be learned, disciplined, and kind”. Being learned is the outer quality and no master can do without it; discipline is the inner quality and its main purpose is to serve as a skilful means to discover inner truth but not another code of conduct; while kindness is the secret quality that is supreme and indispensable without which the first two qualities, i.e., learning and discipline, go waste.

Political scientists may question rationale behind the Fourth Majesty's decision, given that kings were historically realpolitik pragmatists. But close observers of Bhutan, particularly of politics and monarchy, will not be surprised. Bhutan's democratic transition should be understood in the larger context of reforms initiated by the Third Majesty of Bhutan Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. If the first two monarchs centralized state power to consolidate monarchy, the next two successive monarchs decentralized state power, and worked towards transforming the absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy.

The Third Majesty, whose 20 years reign (1952-1972) coincided with the decolonization of Africa and Asia and the emergence of new independent states, began the process of creating a modern Bhutanese nation-state to meet the challenges of the 20th century, which until then had been avoided through a self-imposed isolation policy. The Third Majesty ended Bhutan's centuries-old isolation policy by initiating socio-economic development, democratizing the traditional Bhutanese state by decentralizing the state power and authority, and establishing necessary institutions and symbols of a modern nation-state. The establishment of the National Assembly as the legislative branch of the government in 1953

was the first reforms toward a constitutional monarchy, followed by *Thrimzhung Chenmo* (Supreme Laws) in 1959 that provided one law for all subjects; establishment of the high court in 1968, and district court and sub-district courts the following year; the Royal Advisory Council in 1965 to advise the king on any matter of great importance to the country; and the council of ministers in 1968 as an executive branch.

The Third Majesty empowered the National Assembly to remove the government ministers in 1968. He not only renounced his veto power over the National Assembly but also instituted a vote of no confidence in him by the house. He established a standing army in 1959 and put Bhutan permanently on the world map through a United Nations membership in 1971. He abolished a social category that reeked of serfdom and distributed lands to landless citizens.

### **Democratic Transition**

Let me now discuss some popular democratization theories, most of which establish positive links between socio-economic development and political changes. The central thesis of Seymour Lipset's (1959) classic article on modernization theory is that the richer countries have greater chances to sustain democracy. While correlating wealth and democracy, he claims that economic prosperity will result in profound social changes, which in turn will produce democracy. His basic premise is that a rapid economic development will create an alternative power centre to challenge the state power. The wealthier societies, he argues, tend to have higher levels of urbanization and literacy, different sophisticated means of communication, greater social equality and mobility, and larger middle classes, all of which are associated with, and necessary for, the emergence and functioning of democratic institutions. Samuel Huntington (1968) similarly believed in economic development's capacity to bring about profound social changes but argued that countries in the throes of dramatic social transformation tend to be unstable and violent.

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The dependency theorists argue that economic development bred bureaucratic authoritarianism, not democracy in the Latin America and other developing countries. Economic development or a shift to a free-market economy was found to be the cause of the third wave of global democratization that swept across from southern Europe to East Asia and from Latin America to the Soviet Union. Przeworski and Limongi (1997) explained that the earlier democratization theorists have failed to differentiate between 'democratization' (i.e., establishing democracy) and 'consolidation' (sustaining democracy), and assert that economic development fosters the latter, not the former. The elite bargain theory points to negotiation among existing powers as the reason for democratization. Heterogeneous elites negotiate to compromise and share power.

According to Larry Diamond (2008), democratization process is a result of internal and external factors: the internal factors are the loss of regime's legitimacy due to non-delivery of economic development, success in delivery of economic development, shift in people's values due to economic development, and the rise of civil society. The external factors, Diamond mentions, are pressures on authoritarian government through diplomacy, economic assistance and sanctions; assistance to strengthen democratic institutions, civil society, and governance reform; and democratization by force, which is the last resort. He emphasized the role of political leadership and international support for democracy and demolished an old notion that democracy is a culture-bound Western artefact. He resisted the conventional scholarly view that democracy tends to follow, and therefore must await, economic modernization. In the poor parts of the world, provision of basic social services and economic growth, not ideas, is what democrats and authoritarians fight for.

How does Bhutan's transition fit within these democratic transition frameworks? They are inadequate to explain Bhutan's transition. Despite a recent rise in living standard

and dramatic changes in socio-economic conditions, Bhutan is still a third world country with a per capita GDP of only Nu 89,638 in 2010 (Nidup Gyeltshen, 2010). It is an agrarian country, with two-thirds of the population depending on agriculture for livelihood. 23.7 percent of the population lives below poverty line of Nu 1,096.94 per person per month (National Statistics Bureau, 2007). Similarly, the national adult literacy rate is 53 percent, with 30.9 percent urbanization (Office of the Census Commissioner, 2006).

If none of the prevailing democratic transition theories are inadequate to explain Bhutan's unique transition to democracy, how was democracy possible in Bhutan? What are the causes and conditions that made the transition smooth?

### **Causes and Conditions**

If there is one, just one reason for Bhutan's democratic transition, it is the leadership of the Fourth Majesty who had shown that if the leaders are committed to democracy, the transition can be smooth and peaceful. The Fourth Majesty had always kept the interests of the nation before anyone else's. After the coronation, the Fourth Majesty consolidated the Third Majesty's reforms and initiated a series of political reforms, such that the preceding reform was systematically planned to cumulatively lead and add to the next. They finally culminated in his abdication and introduction of democracy in 2008. These reforms, albeit repeated like a mantra in any publications or discussions on decentralization, is worth narrating here.

Necessary executive and financial power devolved to a district-level institution called district development committee (*Dzongkhag Yargye Tshogchung*) instituted in 1981. District development committee was made responsible for making development plans for districts through public consultation while bureaucracy's role was restricted to implementing

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decision of the people. The decision-making was taken right to the people in 1991 by establishing block development committee (*Gewog Yargye Tshogchung*) to involve rural communities directly in the decision-making process. Block development committee became a local platform for expressing development interests of villages. The *gewog*, smallest administrative unit constituted by a group of villages, made their own development plans.

After dissolving the old handpicked cabinet, the council of ministers elected by National Assembly was given executive power in 1998 while the king became the head of state. For the first time the state and the government became separate entities. A vote of no confidence on the king was also reinstated. By empowering National Assembly (whose members were elected by the people) to elect the new council of ministers, the king made the government responsible and accountable to the people, not to the king as in the past. The system of yearly rotation of the head of the government (minister who got the highest votes served as the first head of government) provided much-needed leadership training to the ministers.

The Fourth Majesty issued a decree for drafting a written constitution in 2001. A 39 members constitution drafting committee was formed under the chair of the Chief Justice. The draft constitution was submitted to the king in August 2005. The Fourth Majesty and the crown prince personally discussed the constitution with the people of all 20 districts.

Seldom mentioned or discussed is the revision of Dzongkhag Yargay Tshogchung and Gewog Yargay Tshogchung *chathrim* in 2003. The two legislations increased administrative, management, and financial powers of these local bodies and provided among others the election of local leaders (*gup*, *chimi*, and *mang-ap*) through universal adult franchise for the first time in 2003. It introduced the new culture of party politics and elections to the people, thus provided much needed



training for the upcoming elections. Earlier the village elders selected the local leaders through consensus followed by a household voting. Gup was a hereditary post before the Third Majesty discontinued it in 1963 (National Assembly Secretariat, 1999, p. 112).

The Fourth Majesty abdicated on 14 December 2006, which is widely seen as a royal sacrifice on the altar of democracy.

Bhutan finally went to the polls to elect the parliament in 2008. The Fourth Majesty had always said that a political system must change with time to fulfil the needs of changing society, and democracy is a viable political institution that could fulfil the aspirations of the people. He said that if democracy is not working well in other countries, it isn't because of democracy's inherent weakness, but due to the abuse of democracy by those in power. The biggest weakness of monarchy, the Fourth Majesty said, is that a person becomes a king by birth not merit, and its dependence on one person when the country's security and wellbeing is best served by a political system that rest on the collective wisdom of all people. Asked why democracy was introduced now, not earlier or later, the Fourth Majesty explained that democracy should be best introduced at a time when there is a high level of trust among the people across all sections of society; when there is security in the country; when the people were enjoying peace and stability; when the economy is growing; and when the country's foreign relations, particularly the Indo-Bhutan relation, was at a new height. These can be considered as the necessary conditions to introduce democracy in Bhutan (See Sonam Kinga, 2009, pp. 134-161).

In his address to the first sitting of the Parliament on 8 May 2008 the Fifth Majesty said that the people of Bhutan have handed over Bhutan for safekeeping in 1907 to the Wangchuck dynasty, and introducing democracy was an act of returning it to the people after one hundred years.

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The highest achievement of one hundred years of monarchy has been the constant nurturing of Democracy. This has culminated today with the first sitting of Parliament and the start of democracy, whereby my father, the fourth Druk Gyaplo, and I, hereby return to our People the power that had been vested in our kings by our forefathers one hundred years ago (Cited in Sonam Kinga, 2009, p. 377).

Bhutan's transition to democracy and institution of a hereditary monarchy in 1907 were equally unique. Ugyen Wangchuck was enthroned as the first hereditary king by the representative of the people after signing a *gantshig* (letter of undertaking): the undertaking of the king was "laying down a secure future" for Bhutan and its people, while on their part, the signatories were to serve the king and his heirs with loyalty and dedication. As Sonam Kinga puts it, the political reform is not a mere survival strategy for the monarchy, but it is reaffirmation as a progressive institution of social and political changes; it is not a cosmetic relic of a sacral past but a vibrant national institution (Sonam Kinga, 2010).

### **Challenges**

Bhutan's young democracy is not without challenges.

Two important responsibilities of the government can be said to improve the welfare of the people and to establish a solid democratic foundation. How far will the democratic roots grow in the country will depend on the elected government's performance in fulfilling these responsibilities.

Monarchy replaced a political system that had failed to provide political stability, and the one that brought much sufferings to the people in forms of heavy taxation, corvée labour and conscriptions to fight endless civil wars. If the success of the Wangchuck dynasty, especially during the last 50 years, was often measured in comparison to the preceding exploitative political era, the elected government's performance will be

gauged in comparison to the Wangchuck dynasty's achievements. There is nothing much the elected government can do in addition to what the monarchs had already done for the people. The challenges facing the new government are complex, and the needs of the people have climbed Maslow's hierarchy. This will pose a challenge to the elected government to gain legitimacy. It will also take time for the people to accept the culture of getting legitimacy overnight through periodic elections. So long as Bhutan remains a development state whose popular legitimacy rests on the ability of the state to deliver economic development, there are also opportunities for the elected government to strengthen democracy and gain wider acceptance among the populations.

One legacy of the Fourth Majesty is Gross National Happiness that continues to guide Bhutan's development. Simply put, GNH is the promotion of holistic development by balancing physical and non-physical needs of the people, and seeing development as a means towards an end, i.e., happiness of the people, and not as an end.

One major challenge facing the country is reconciling democracy with GNH. In 2008 both political parties embraced GNH values in their party manifestoes and both ran on a GNH platform. GNH was explained to be compatible with party politics during the election campaigns. Very often politicians explained GNH in terms of delivering GDP. However, there are fundamental differences between the two. Democracy is only a subset of GNH. There is a risk of GNH becoming peripheral to democracy, rather than the other way. What drives democracy is the narrow interest of the political parties while GNH tries to promote common public goods. The challenge is to embed democratic value and practice within GNH framework. For Bhutan, democracy should be a means to achieve GNH goal. GNH is a long-term vision while the vision of party politics is often no longer than the electoral cycle, although it should not be devoid of short-term pragmatic actions for it to be relevant. If the party is to be electorally successful, it must respond to

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people's choices. However, popular choices will not necessarily conform to GNH that is oriented towards long-term goals. The voters will evaluate the government's performance in terms of fulfilling their needs, what are often short-term, myopic and physical. GNH is about sacrifice, especially suffering short-term pain for long-term gain. So far, the kings have been a source of justice and welfare, which has been one of the monarchy's legitimizing forces among the people.

Safeguarding the sovereignty and security of Bhutan is one of the reasons for introducing democracy. The monarchy inherited a society rife with traditional prejudices and backwardness temporarily insulated by self-imposed isolation. The socio-economic and political transformation of the last one hundred years has transformed Bhutan into a sovereign and independent modern nation-state. The survival of Bhutan as an independent country in the aftermath of geo-political events that were unkind to similar states in the region is not an historical accident or geographical luck, but the outcome of conscious decisions of the monarchs. One big question being asked of the elected government is its ability to consolidate and strengthen the country's independence and sovereignty. The party politics is fundamentally a spiltist ideology while safeguarding the sovereignty and independence require unity and solidarity. Most of the times, winning the election becomes primary to the country's security.

Both the formal and informal discourses on Bhutan's democracy conflate into one word, 'gift' (*solra*). Democracy is seen as a precious gift from a benevolent monarch although the Fourth Majesty has explained that it was his duty to provide the people with a constitution for future security and prosperity of Bhutan. Democracy is understood as a precious gift from the king. No matter how 'priceless' the gift, a gift is a gift. Because democracy came as a gift without having to fight for it, it is unlikely to be valued as much as what had been won through hard struggles and sacrifice.

There is a risk of democracy widening the fault lines of the rich and the poor, urban and rural dwellers, and the illiterate and educated. Due to lack of understanding about democracy and functioning of its institutions among the poor, rural residents and the illiterates, there is a risk of democracy being hijacked by the rich, urban-dwellers, or the educated Bhutanese elites, through what is known as an 'elite capture' (Dessallien, 2005). Five out of 11 ministers, including prime minister, of the first cabinet of the first democratically elected government were former ministers, and the first election is widely understood as an elite capture. By making civil servants apolitical, it has shut the voices of educated section of populations who could otherwise engage in constructive criticism of the government. Chances of the elite capture are made more likely by the bachelor's degree qualification set for standing as an MP candidate. The ultimate result would be the control of power by few elites, which will only grow the signs of oligarchy surfacing today.

The Bhutanese people understand democracy in terms of strikes and demonstrations they hear or experience personally while travelling in the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal. Hence, they are highly sceptical of democracy. The anti-government demonstrations of the 1989-90s and its association with corrupt practices in the region are other reasons for its bad image.

In the first democratic election, the ruling party won 45 out of 47 seats in the National Assembly. In face of the ruling party's absolute majority, the opposition party, the upper house, and the media is seen as crucial to maintaining the balance. Given its long tradition of consensus politics, similar electoral results cannot be ruled out in future elections. A government with an absolute majority, despite its many advantages, is seen as a potential seed of authoritarianism, and any well-intentioned reform it initiates will be criticized and resisted.

## **Conclusion**

In his abdication decree, the Fourth Majesty attributed whatever progress Bhutan had made so far to “the merit of the people of Bhutan”. He expressed his confidence about “a very bright and great future” under “the leadership of a new king and a democratic system of government that is best suited for our country”, and entrusted the future of Bhutan to the people who are “the true custodians of our tradition and culture and the ultimate guardians of the security, sovereignty and continued wellbeing of our country” (Nishimizu, 2008, p. 128).

Whether or not democracy is “best suited” for Bhutan, or whether it will flourish or flounder, only time will tell. But the institution of monarchy that had so far served the people of Bhutan for one hundred years is the final sacrifice that had to be made on the altar of democracy. By aspiring for and then succumbing to what democracy promises both at the level of ideology and practice, Bhutan has traded certainty for uncertainty. But having to face and live with the world of ever-increasing interdependence and interconnectedness, a unilinear transformation of its political system is not an option. Irrespective of democracy’s broken promises to deliver even the basic survival needs in many societies, a democratic label is what any modern nation-state must wear on.

Whatever be the political system, in the end it should serve the interests of the nation, spelt out by the Fourth Majesty in his abdication decree, “to strengthen the sovereignty and security of Bhutan, to secure the blessings of liberty, ensure justice and peace in our country, and enhance the unity, happiness and wellbeing of our people for all time to come.” (Nishimizu, 2008, p. 128). The untimely abdication is a personal sacrifice the Fourth Majesty made to ensure a successful democratic transition. The royal sacrifice has made monarchy a martyr, because by giving up the king’s right to rule, the monarch’s ‘moral right to reign’ has been reinforced, thereby

strengthening the institution of monarchy (Sonam Kinga, 2010).

If the democratic transition theories are not so useful in explaining Bhutan's case, the lessons of other countries will not be so useful in understanding democracy's many pitfalls. Since the leadership of the Fourth Majesty is seen as the reason for the democratic transition, it will be the leadership of the successive monarchs that will make the democratic transition process irreversible by laying a solid foundation of democracy, strengthening democratic structures and institutions, establishing good governance, raising public awareness and consciousness of democracy, and changing their mindsets.

Despite many challenges and fulfilling none of the preconditions of the democratic transition, the transition has been peaceful. There are many indicators that could be understood as signs of a healthy democracy. The high court's ruling on the first constitutional case between the government and the opposition over the government's tax increase, which went in favour of the opposition, and later upheld by the supreme court, is one clear indicator of a strong and independent judiciary. Similarly, it has become difficult for the first elected government to pass a law in the National Assembly even where it had 45 out of 47 seats. The so-called fourth estate, the media, has been growing over the years. From only one newspaper in 2006, there are 2 daily and 5 weeklies as the people's watchdog.

Just as Bhutan can learn from mistakes of other countries in its socio-economic development effort, the same can also be said of democracy and mistakes avoided. Given its strategic geo-political location, Bhutan cannot afford mistakes. Its margin error is small.

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