

“Development of Democracy in Bhutan - A personal perspective”

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I would like to thank Ellen and the Danish-Bhutanese Friendship association for inviting me to be part of this event. I am deeply honoured. I must add that when Ellen asked me to give a talk on democracy in Bhutan, I was bit apprehensive in that I am no expert on democracy. Therefore, my talk today is rather a fragmented and a shallow personal reflections on our democracy.

Prior to 1907, Bhutan lived through 250 years of civil wars and sufferings due to power struggle between warring chiefs. It was a long period of instability that saw new rulers called DESIS every four and half years on average. While the wave of democracy spread across the globe in the 19th and 20th century, a reverse effect took place in Bhutan and we became a monarchy in 1907. The institution of Monarchy ushered in a period of unprecedented political stability and peace, which was accompanied by economic prosperity after the second half of the 20th century. In brief, it was a century of socio-political and economic growth that created the right conditions for Bhutan’s transition to Democratic Constitutional Monarchy in 2008.

When we retrospect on our history, we realize that Bhutan’s transition to a democracy in a manner and circumstances we did, makes it incredibly different and special. In our context, the introduction of democracy added a profound meaning to the institution of monarchy and deeper reverence for our Kings. Nine years after Bhutan became a democracy, I feel Bhutanese people are still coming to terms with the concept of democracy. Yet there are some who still do not value democracy as a form of governance in a manner our Kings desire. I believe this is so because, let alone blood, Bhutanese did not shed even a drop of sweat to become a democracy.

As we all know, whatever model a nation adopts, we all seek a political system which is most likely to bring good collective leadership, reducing dependence on individual rulers. At least

this was the premise on which His Majesty the King and His Majesty the Fourth King introduced democracy in Bhutan. Short of sounding clichéd, I must say that there are no parallels in today's world of leaders leading by higher ideals than our Kings.

When the Constitution was being drafted in Bhutan, I am inclined to believe that it was the intention of His Majesty the Fourth King to introduce a different and a unique form of democracy which best suited Bhutan. The uniqueness of our democracy can be inferred from our Constitution, which has only Thirty Five Articles. I would like to pick out and highlight some of the articles from our constitution which I find interesting.

While Bhutan is a multi-party democracy, a system of elimination in the primary round allows only two major political parties to contest for seats in the parliament. I think this is an ingenious way of ensuring political stability for the party that wins the election.

Our constitution requires an aspiring candidate for any elected constitutional posts to have a university degree. He or she cannot be more than 65 years of age to run for an office. In fact the Constitution requires even the King to abdicate at the age of 65 years. Some critics say that such requirements of minimum educational qualification and maximum age limits restricts participation expected of in a democracy. My personal take on this is the odds of electing capable leaders are greater if they have completed college education.

The Constitution also requires religion to be separated from politics. Therefore religious personalities are not allowed to partake in politics or vote during elections. This is also seen as limiting democracy in Bhutan. For a country with small voter base, barring the clergy from voting is an interesting subject for debate.

The Constitutional requirement to maintain a minimum of 60% of the country under forest cover at all times to come is quite unique to Bhutan. Bhutanese have co-existed with its environment for many generations. It has been a symbiotic relationship built on traditional belief system. Now a more

scientific approach has become the reason for protecting our environment.

I believe that one of the primary reasons behind introduction of democracy in Bhutan was to strengthen our sovereignty. A geographical entity with a democratic political system based on a written constitution only legitimizes it as an independent and sovereign country. For Bhutan, in the perfect blend of a revered monarchy and a stable democratic political system based on a constitution, we have both the substance and form of an independent and sovereign country.

For a small country with a population of about 750,000, national unity is of utmost importance for its security and sovereignty as encapsulated in the Constitution. It is too early for me to say if democracy in Bhutan infuses a sense of national cohesion. Rather, we look to the Throne as the unifying energy, in the face of divisive politics that we are slowly getting accustomed to. I suppose divisive politics are unavoidable anywhere in the world, for democracy is founded on the principle of debate and alternate if not conflicting ideas. The risk being, divisive politics can be harmful and smaller societies such as ours are particularly vulnerable. Therefore, Bhutanese people must learn to accommodate divisive politics as a norm and rally in unity behind elected government once elections are over. Our ability to do this will determine the true character of our democracy.

Accountability is a major aspect of how and why we conceive democracy. And it is done so with the aim of creating a perfect balance between the power of the elected and the voters electing them. This balance of power is maintained by the term limit of the elected governments. One of the most remarkable changes that have taken place in Bhutan is the accountability of elected officials to the people. Never ever have Bhutanese public officials been under constant public scrutiny like they are now. Therefore, compulsion of accountability to the people and the incentive of re-election is making the executive more efficient and people oriented. If you find a minister missing from Thimphu for weeks on, it is most likely he or she is somewhere in a remote corner of the country with the people. The Prime Minister is constitutionally required to present an annual report

to the Parliament of the government's achievements. The report itself is also subjected to public scrutiny, debate and criticism. Democratic culture has made our system more transparent and it is difficult for public officials to function with impunity.

Small Voter base:

Given the size of our population, the size of eligible voters in Bhutan is even smaller. During the 2013 General elections, there were only about 380,000 eligible registered voters of which only 66% (250,000) exercised their franchise. It is a matter of concern that lesser number of voters exercised their franchise during the second parliamentary elections. If the eligible voters are broken down into 47 different constituencies, the small voter base in Bhutan becomes more pronounced.

This presents both an opportunity and challenge. It is an opportunity in the sense that every voter knows the value of their vote and more likely to participate in the democratic process. A point in case was during the last general election when a candidate won from his constituency by a single vote. I don't know if any election anywhere in the world was this close. There can be no better illustration of the value and power of every single vote than this.

The down side being, even a small segment of a community could extract concessions and favour from politicians. It is for this reason, that His Majesty always reminds the people that voters must choose wisely the most competent candidate keeping in mind the national interest.

A democracy cannot be complete without a free media and the impact of mass media on the quality of democracy is undeniable. In Bhutan, democracy has led to growth of mass media, especially newspapers and radio. Today we have 8 newspaper and 6 radio stations and of course one television broadcaster. I believe our media has come a long way in terms of their ability to facilitate public discourse on important national issues. The explosion of social media has complemented the main-stream media in providing an avenue for an unrestrained discussions on important issues. An important observation is that Government is taking note of

issues and concerns discussed both in the mainstream and social media.

Last year, the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs issued a regulation requiring women to wear a uniform ceremonial scarf called **Ada Rachu**. This scarf is worn during formal occasions. The government later rescinded this order following criticism both in the mainstream and social media. The point I am trying to make is our media is functioning and I see a very healthy balance between the Government and the media

Freedom of press is the quintessence of a good democracy. Criticism of self-censorship is often dished out at Bhutanese media perhaps unfairly. The 2016 Reporters without Borders ranks Bhutan at 94 out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index. I take comfort in the fact that Bhutan is the best-ranked country in South Asia in terms of press freedom and that also by an appreciable margin. For example, India is ranked at 133, Pakistan at 147, Afghanistan at 120, Bangladesh 144, Nepal 105, Maldives 112, Sri Lanka at 141. All other South Asian countries are much older democracies than Bhutan as are also their media. In a young democracy where the media is relatively young and inexperienced, we need to give them time to grow. Looking at where Bhutan stands on press freedom, I think our democracy is progressing in the right direction.

We are only two parliamentary elections old and with democracy, expectations of the people are also evolving. Bhutanese people increasingly expect the government and related institutions to live and lead by higher ideals of the constitution. There has also been a growth a 'Rights' Culture' in Bhutan, partly engendered by the constitution and partly encouraged by outside influences. As a result of this, Government institutions are being subjected to unprecedented scrutiny and strains. In this context, 2016 was a particularly interesting year for the judiciary in that it was discussed so extensively both in the mainstream and social media like never before. The discussions bordered on erosion of people's trust and confidence in the judiciary and in one instant even the credibility of the Chief Justice was questioned.

Interestingly, the Annual Judicial Conference held recently in Thimphu had the theme **“Inspiring public trust and confidence”**. The deliberations during the conference, among others, also touched on the lack of compliance to the judicial code of conduct by the court officials. I see this as a positive response by the judiciary to public opinion on the conduct of the judiciary. How this has come about is not important. That the judiciary is cognizant of public opinion and is taking measures to meet people’s evolving expectation is more important. This also is an indication of the good health of our democracy.

Freedom of Speech:

During the last couple of years, the subject of what constitutes an **individual’s freedom of speech** has also been widely discussed. Two instances of individual posts on social media were deemed as defamation and were legally charged in the court of law. The defendants sought relief under freedom of speech. The proceedings in both cases were followed with deep interest in Bhutan and also outside. However, in both instances the plaintiffs withdrew the charges before the court verdict could be issued. If the legal proceedings were completed, it would have set an interesting precedent of how individual freedom of speech was defined in the Bhutanese context. For now that will have to wait. We are still going through a learning process like everyone else before us did. I am confident that with time, every Bhutanese citizen will get a deeper understanding of his or her constitutional rights and by that token, an understanding of the rights of fellow citizens as well.

We pride ourselves as a country where women enjoy equal status as men in the society. However, women participation and representation in our various institutions are rather low. I am aware that Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy (DIPD) has done some work in Bhutan on this issue. For example, in our 72-member parliament, there are only 6 female representatives, which accounts for about 8%. In terms of women representation in the parliament, Bhutan is ranked at a poor 170 out of 193 countries. How we address this disparity is an issue, with overwhelming number including women in support of a merit-based system.

The National Commission for Women and Children initiated a move to reserve 33% of the quota for women in the nomination process to all elected post. The proposal has already run into difficulties. The Chairperson of the NCWC, who is Bhutan's first and only women minister said that the proposal is not feasible as it will require reforming existing systems and electoral law. For now it appears to me democracy will not address the issue of low women representation. Bhutanese people will continue to debate the wisdom behind women's quota or the lack of it. How we fare, only time will tell.

That said, there is a bright side as well. His Majesty the King has appointed 8 women officials to various constitutional positions. Further two women have been appointed as Dzongdas, which was erstwhile a male domain. I must also add that of the 7 ambassadors we have, two are women. I believe that this is a deliberate move to address gender disparity in leadership roles through royal prerogatives. These women are appointed on the basis of their professional merit from an ever-growing pool of educated and competent women and not on the basis of their gender. Over the years, there has been an incremental growth of women representation in the civil service and I hope this will happen in politics as well.

A democracy can never be complete without a vibrant civil societies and Bhutanese democracy is going well on this count too. It is interesting that the first CSO in Bhutan, the National Women's Association of Bhutan was established through a resolution passed by the National Assembly in 1981 and this was the only NGO in Bhutan for a long until the years preceding democracy. There was a time in Bhutan when government was reluctant to provide space for CSOs but this changed drastically now. Democracy has spurred the growth of civil societies in Bhutan and today we have 38 public benefit organizations and 12 mutual benefit organizations. Today in Bhutan, the CSOs are not only filling the gaps left by the government but they also work with the Government on many initiatives and I find this very encouraging.

In concluding, I would like to say that Bhutan's transition from monarchy to a democracy was an emotional and psychological

challenge in the first few years as is the case when we move out from a comfort zone to uncharted waters. In Bhutan democracy has come about in a measured and prescribed manner and therefore in the period that we have been through Bhutanese have adjusted well to the changed political system. The challenge for Bhutanese democracy being it must become the source of hope and inspiration as Bhutanese were under direct rule of the monarchy. It must strive to create conditions conducive for attainment of Gross National Happiness as enshrined in our Constitution.

Thank you and Tashi Delek.
