The Druk Journal

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Democratisation of Bhutan

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Introduction

The Druk Journal is contributing to Bhutan's growth as a democracy and as a modern nation state. It is becoming an increasingly vibrant public space in which we encourage our contributors to expand our national discourse by introducing new ideas and concepts into the Bhutanese conversation.

Through regular publications, an interactive website, and open discussions after each edition, we engage Bhutanese society in conversation so that all citizens can exchange open and frank views on national policies and issues that are important for Bhutan.

The Druk Journal hopes, not only to inform citizens, but to build a community of people that will play an active role, as individuals and as a community, in the development of analytical attitudes toward national policies. It is our hope that participation in such a community will encourage individuals to engage in policy research that can be made available to the government and larger Bhutanese society.

The Druk Journal thus serves as a vehicle for the development of a community of people who are concerned about national issues and want to participate in the development of policy by thinking publicly and through conversation. Such a community of thinkers will also draw on the experience of other countries in those areas of political, social, economic, and cultural experimentation that are relevant to our own concerns.

The Druk Journal is a non-partisan publication. Our purpose is to serve the national interest through the development of serious conversation on issues from every possible constructive point of view. We have no editorial position of our own. We believe that our stated objectives and the means we will use to achieve them are the best way in which we can serve our country and His Majesty The King.

We invite the participation of all interested citizens and friends of Bhutan in this endeavour. Each edition of The Druk Journal will focus on a particular theme. 2018 being a year of general elections this seventh issue of The Druk Journal carries the theme "Party Politics and Elections in the Democratisation of Bhutan".

We wish you Good Reading, Good Thinking, and Good Conversation.

Editorial

Bhutan is approaching its third general election under the Constitution, which was adopted to establish a Democractic Constitutional Monarchy. The election being scheduled for late 2018, the Spring 2018 issue of The Druk Journal aims to contribute critically and constructively both to the 2018 elections and to the process of democratisation as another step forward. The proposed title for the spring 2018 issue of the journal is "Party Politics and Elections in the Democratisation of Bhutan".

A decade into the democratisation process in Bhutan, political discourse remains superficial and politics primarily personal. This issue of the Journal aims to take political discourse in Bhutan to a depth that Bhutanese society has not yet experienced. It also aims to encourage debate in the new election cycle that will focus more on issues than on the competitive promises that candidates make to win votes. To be distributed at a time when the political process is gathering momentum, The Druk Journal carries articles that analyse, honestly and realistically, the current stage of democratisation to seriously critique the electoral process and raise and discuss issues that candidates for parliament should be debating. The articles should encourage candidates to reflect on their activities and, at the same time, encourage the electorate to question politicians at a more profound level.

The articles are authored by a broad range of people, including analysts, journalists, politicians involved in the electoral process, citizens who are observing and experiencing the political process, as well as observers in other parts of South Asia and beyond. They examine the electoral provisions of the Constitution, critique the first two elections that took place under the Constitution, raise issues that we think ought to form the substance of the political debate that should be at the centre of the 2018 electoral cycle, and realistically evaluate the evolving democratising system.

The articles in this issue of The Druk Journal have both an immediacy of its publication during the 2018 electoral cycle and a clarity that encourages longer-range analysis and a deepening of the process of democratisation.

Political Parties in the 21st Century

Bjørn Førde

How to Address the Challenges?

Once upon a time

My mother was born into a social democratic family, just like her father. She had been a party member since she was old enough to vote, and she voted for the party in every election. I once asked her if she had ever considered voting for a different party. "Never!" She told me. To her, this would be like committing heresy.

Later, she admitted that there had been a few elections where the positions of her party were not exactly what she wanted. However, when she was in high school, her father had told her that there would be difficult moments, when she would be in doubt. This was only natural, but it would never be a good enough reason to leave the party or vote for another. Once a social democrat, always a social democrat!

It was different with my father. He grew up on a middle-sized farm, and his father had been a member of the farmers' party, — the Liberal Party — since he was old enough to vote. He ran successfully for a seat in the Rural Council, where the Liberal Party had a confident majority, and he was elected Chair several times.

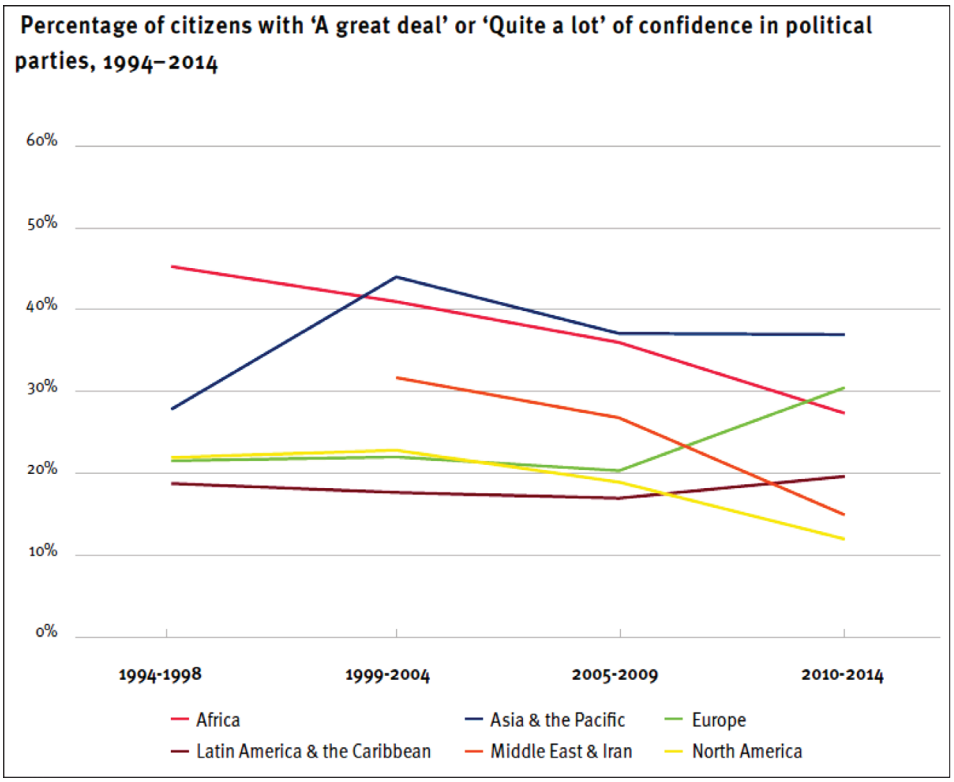
Maybe, if my father had stayed on the farm and decided to become a farmer, he would also have become a member of the Liberal Party. Instead, he got the opportunity to study in the city, where he met fellow students with a diverse range of political inclinations. My sense is that he chose to vote for a different party in almost every election.

The examples of how my parents engaged with political parties half a century ago are not unique. Back then, more people than today were loyal members of a party. For many families, membership passed from one generation to the next. The ideologies of the parties were in many ways much clearer than what we see today. Different groups or classes in society tended to cluster around certain parties, like railroad workers with Social Democrats and farmers with Liberals. In general, politicians and parties were trusted and seen as key for the well-being and functioning of our democracy.

Loss of Confidence in Political Parties

Today, the position of the political party as a key institution of our democracy, trusted and supported by the majority of citizens and voters, is under threat. Opinion polls in many countries seem to tell the same story of politicians and parties being among the least trusted in society.

Levels of trust vary from country to country, and from region to region, with North America at the lowest level of all right now, and Asia and the Pacific at the highest, which might come as a surprise to some. See the graphic presentation below.[1]



The specific reasons for the low levels of trust differ between countries and regions. However, some of the explanations are rather simple and straightforward, despite parties and politicians being different. We see unrealistic promises presented during election campaigns, with very little will, ability or possibility to deliver. We see examples of how politicians use politics as a platform to enrich themselves. All around the world, we see huge amounts

1 "The Global State of Democracy 2017. Exploring Democracy's Resilience." International IDEA, 2017, page 102. The presentation uses information from the World Values Survey Waves 1-6, 1994-2014.

invested to get parties and politicians elected, and it is not always clear where the money is coming from. Citizens get the sense that if you have enough money, you can buy your way into the offices of government.

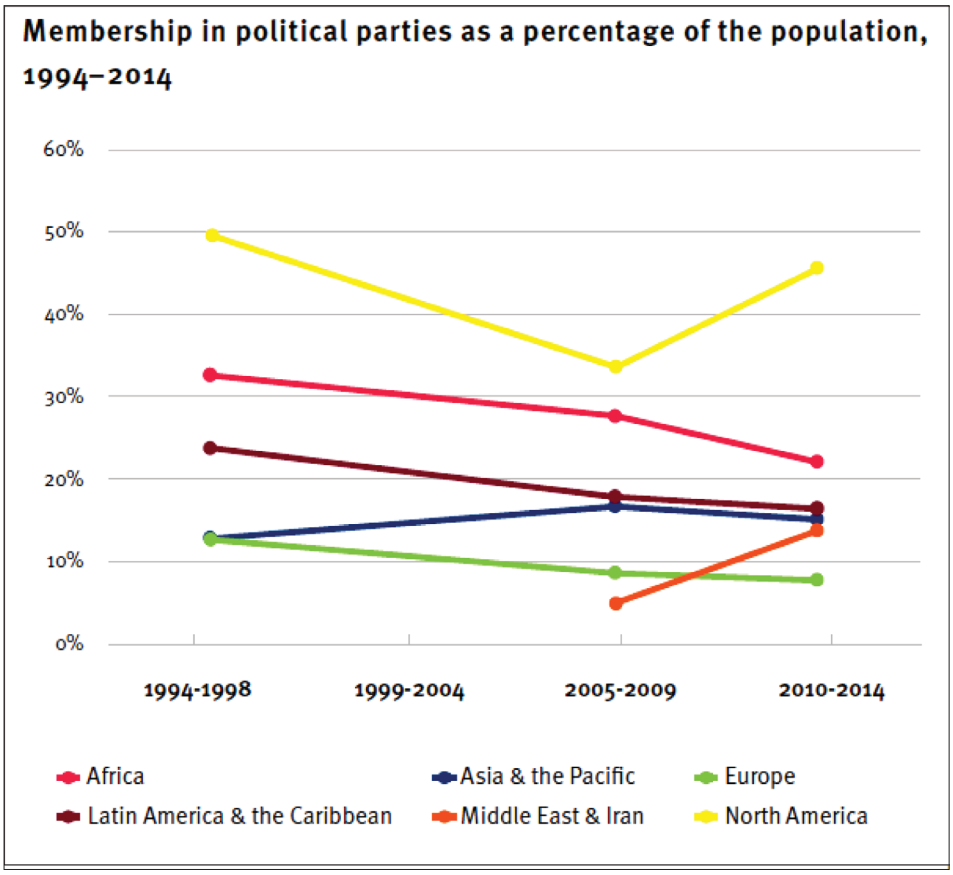
All of this contributes to the loss of confidence in the important role political parties must play in a democracy, and I agree that there are plenty of examples of parties and leaders acting in blatant disregard of principles of honesty, truthfulness, transparency, and accountability.

However, we should not forget that the reality in which political parties operate today is fundamentally different from the days of the 19th century, when the modern version of a political party was "invented". In particular, we have seen the processes of urbanisation, modernisation, and globalisation (some might add "westernisation") create a lot of wealth and progress, as well as a lot of new concerns.

In fact, the nation state is no longer the only well-known territory that political parties have to understand and control. They have to understand the global issues that affect the nation state. Most of the legislation presented to the parties in the Danish parliament reflects our membership of the European Union. Some legislation is shaped by our participation in global partnerships on trade and climate change, or by membership of the United Nations.

Political parties and politicians consequently do not have the level of "control" offered by the nation state characterised by a crude 19th century class society. The reality is that the individual party and the individual politician today are less influential than was the case decades ago. When citizens realise that their representatives have less control, power and influence over the nation state than they thought, they naturally get frustrated and maybe even angry. A logical reaction can be to criticise the traditional political parties for not doing their job! The next step could be to vote for a new party that offers convincing solutions to complex situations (like the global economic crisis, international terrorism or the waves of refugees), although the "old" parties and politicians would see these solutions as simplistic.

I emphasise this because I believe that a revival of the political party as a trusted and respected institution in liberal democracies must rely on a realistic understanding of the world we presently live in, and not the world we would like to live in. This is not an easy challenge! If parties expect to attract members, — and more members are necessary for parties to have legitimacy — they have to understand that the notion of "membership" is different today from what it used to be.



The downward trend in membership of political parties is often (and correctly so) used as an indicator of the erosion of importance and trust of parties, not least in the case of Europe, with many old-style parties rooted in the 19th century political reality.

However, as reflected in the graphic presentation above[2], the birthplace of the modern political party seems to be doing worse than parties in other regions. While an average of 4.7 percent of citizens have joined a political party in Europe in 2010-2014, the global average is 14 percent, with levels in Africa and Latin America surpassing the global average. In North America and the Middle East, the numbers have even increased.

2 "The Global State of Democracy 2017. Exploring Democracy's Resilience." International IDEA, 2017, page 109. The presentation uses information from the World Values Survey Waves 1-6, 1994-2014.

Democratic Functions of Political Parties

Before we move from the rather gloomy descriptive phase of the difficulties facing political parties, we need to look at the key functions of a political party. When we have established the rationale for these functions, we can more productively look at what political parties need to do to reclaim their role. Here we have to remember that the present debate is far from new. In fact, the critique of political parties for not delivering in reality what we believe in theory they should be able to deliver, started decades ago.

The academic research and literature on the role and functions of political parties is rich. I prefer a five-point framework[3], because I feel that it combines the aspects of ideology and representation with the important capacity to govern. I will present each component with an indication of the major sub-components.

1. **To mobilise citizens** must be a major concern for every political party, new or old. A critical mass of members is required to provide the financial support for the party infrastructure (staff, offices, outreach capacity and analytical capacity); members are also necessary to help mobilise the electorate during campaigns. A party therefore needs to consider its local level outreach, both the means of communicating through social media, and the need to be physically present in local branches around the country.

2. **To aggregate interests** is about the ability of a party to assess the interests of the population in general, and to understand the major interests during election campaigns in particular. Large parties with members all across the country will have an advantage over small parties that may have a few strongholds. Big parties will normally also have more resources (money) to invest in expensive surveys that can help assess the various interests, and even more importantly, decide to prioritise which interests are more important.

3. **To recruit candidates** to run for a seat in parliament, and ultimately government, is the task citizens and media often seem to be most interested in, because we increasingly live in times when personalities are given more attention than policies. What we forget is that it can take years of hard work before a candidate is mature enough to go public and compete in an election. The grooming of a candidate involves practice in how to present a policy, speak in public, and debate with others. To begin

3 This framework is primarily based on writings by Pippa Norris, the Paul F. McGuire Lecturer in Comparative Politics at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. She is ranked the fourth most cited political scientist worldwide.

with, the candidate will often operate at the local branch level, until she has matured enough to step up to the national level. This really requires strategic planning. Rarely will a candidate rise from the unknown and become a hit overnight. It can take years of hard work.

4. **To develop policies** is essentially about the ability of a party to take the process of aggregating the interests identified through surveys and membership inputs a step further, and develop specific policy proposals that are clear and convincing enough to win an election. Some parties do this in a centralised and top-down manner, while others involve all the levels of the party from bottom to top. One important aspect is for the party to make sure that the policies developed to respond to the urgent challenges defined by the electorate are in line with party ideology as defined in the party programme.

5. **To collaborate with other parties** is an important function and ability in most political systems, but of course more so in multi-party systems than in two-party systems. In a proportional electoral system like the one we have in Denmark — with presently nine parties represented in parliament — we know that one party will never get enough votes to have a majority. Any party wishing to form a government knows that it needs the support of one or more of the other parties, and this therefore requires a certain degree of humility and willingness to compromise. No party is of course particularly happy about this, and it can be extremely difficult to explain to members, voters, and the media why the party has compromised here and there and maybe a little bit everywhere. This is therefore something the party has to consider carefully. In a two-party system, using a first past the post electoral system, there is not the same necessity for collaboration, because the majority needed to rule is there to begin with.

To summarise, these functions present the minimum requirements for a democratic political party. It needs to be able to mobilise, to aggregate, to recruit, to develop, and to collaborate. The open question is if traditional political parties can regain the trust they have lost by addressing these functions in new ways.

How to Respond to Key Challenges?

To start with, it might be useful to mention that there is presently no full agreement about the exact nature and severity of the crisis of liberal democracy in general, and that of political parties in particular. Yes, we have seen recent

elections and referendums in Europe and the US cause a political earthquake among the traditional elites because new and populist-oriented parties have won. Yes, many legitimately wonder and worry what the result of the Trump presidency will be for US democracy and the world in general.

Still, we cannot be sure if this is just a brief setback for the expansion of democracy globally — that started in the early 1970s and was termed "the third wave of democracy" — or if it is simply the end of that wave, or if we have entered completely new and unknown territory.

A recent publication from the National Democratic Institute states that political parties in the 21st century face a number of existential challenges. Some of these are:[4]

- Why do disenfranchised citizens fail to see party activism as a mechanism to give voice to their concerns?
- How can parties with ideologies, platforms and programmes compete against the rise of populist or single-issue movements?
- If citizens feel disenfranchised with traditional parties, how can the parties then raise legitimate resources for their operations?
- How can political parties manage communication and outreach to keep up with changing citizen expectations?
- Can political parties find ways to reflect a commitment to women's empowerment through policy goals and organisational culture?

I agree that these are valid and relevant issues to ponder, and political parties need to find convincing answers. The National Democratic Institute brought together a variety of political parties in 2017 to discuss solutions. The following recommendations could be useful for democratic parties anywhere in the world:[5]

- **Lead by example:** Political parties should develop truly democratic internal structures and practices if they wish to gain the trust of an increasingly informed and knowledgeable population.

4 Reflect, Reform, Reengage: A Blueprint for 21st Century Parties. The National Democratic Institute, 2017. Page 9-10.

5 The recommendations are presented in the publication: "Reflect, Reform, Reengage: A Blueprint for 21st Century Parties". The National Democratic Institute, 2017. Page 7-8. I have shortened and/or rephrased some of the recommendations.

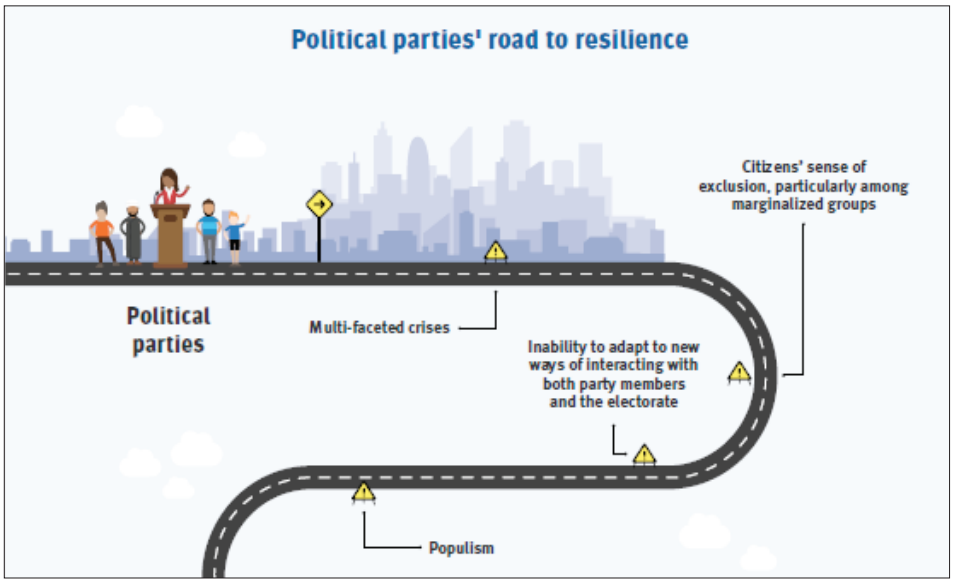
» **Think creatively about "ideology":** Unless "'ideology'" is translated into specific policy choices, it will remain an abstract notion and seen as meaningless by voters.

» **Acknowledge citizens' concerns:** Many citizens feel that parties are out of touch. Leaders must reconnect with citizens and engage with them to find solutions to 21st century challenges.

» **Prioritise gender equality:** Women must have space to exercise their voice and agency, and mechanisms for zero tolerance of harassment and discrimination must be established.

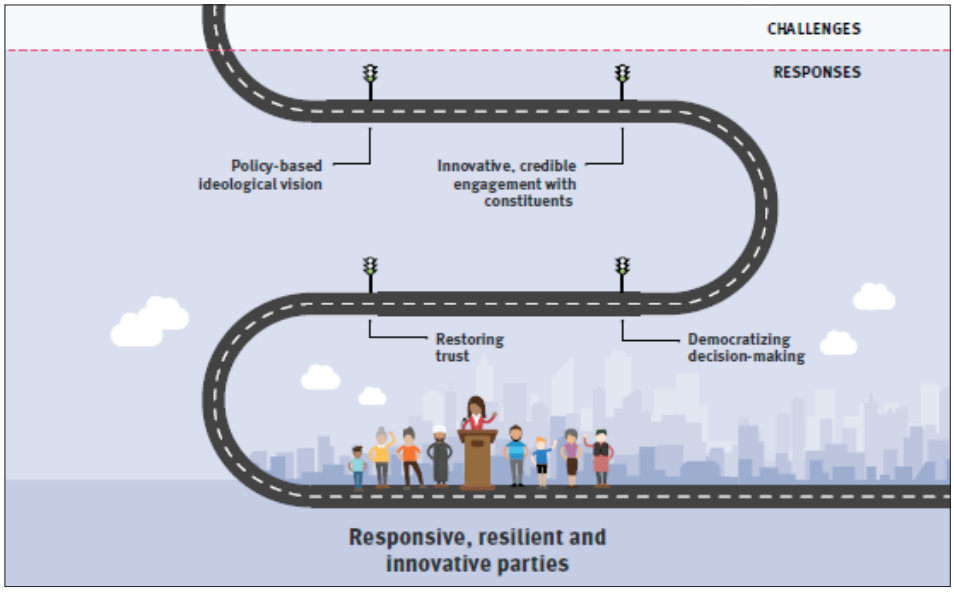
» **Transparency and accountability:** Parties must be clear and honest about who their donors are, and how donations and public funds are spent.

This approach is similar to the analysis made by International IDEA in a new publication about the global state of democracy. First, parties must deliver results to address multifaceted challenges such as global economic crises, international terrorism, and refugee flows. Second, parties must restore citizens' sense of inclusion, particularly among marginalised groups. Third, traditional parties must find ways to respond to populism. Finally, parties need to adapt to new ways of interacting with both party members and the electorate.[6]



6 "The Global State of Democracy 2017. Exploring Democracy's Resilience." International IDEA, 2017, page 101. The presentation uses information from the World Values Survey Waves 1-6, 1994-2014.

I agree with the challenges identified, and I agree that new policy visions, innovative engagement, democratic decision-making and efforts to restore trust are important areas to address, as illustrated in the report.



The recommendations from International IDEA are in line with those from the National Democratic Institute. Those mentioned below are only those that I feel add nuances and perspectives that might be inspiring for the relatively new parties now operating in Bhutan:[7]

- Communicate a strong political vision and offer fresh and innovative programmes to address current issues.
- Create alternative forms of citizen engagement through alternative forms of membership, like associate members or supporters.
- Carefully consider the use of direct democracy instruments such as referendums, being clear about the authority devolved to citizens, and the authority that remains with politicians.
- Remain responsive to the electorate between elections by rethinking communication strategies, updating internal cultures to match the increase in online and street-based interactions.

7 "The Global State of Democracy 2017. Exploring Democracy's Resilience." International IDEA, 2017, page 117-118. The presentation uses information from the World Values Survey Waves 1-6, 1994-2014. I have taken the liberty to shorten the text.

» Expand citizen engagement at all levels by using digital tools such as interactive websites and apps. This includes reaching out to members and non-members for help.

» Increase the transparency of information about elected representatives, including access to financial data about political campaigns and parties and financial interests of representatives.

Is There a Future for Political Parties?

We have become used to political parties being very different in different parts of the world. In Europe, the different parties grew out of the struggle between social classes, some taking a socialist ideology, others a conservative or a liberal ideology. Over time, new parties broke away from the first-generation parties, often positioning the new parties with a more mixed ideological platform, or with new versions of socialism, conservatism or liberalism.

Parties in Europe inspired political parties emerging in Latin America in the 19th century and in Africa and Asia in the 20th century. Naturally, history and culture gave the parties a local colour. A social democratic party in Denmark could therefore be very different from its sisters in Nepal or Ghana. What is striking is that in virtually all liberal democracies developed around the world over 150 years, political parties have been the key instrument to deliver visions and policies. Despite the present crisis, I believe that this will be the case in the future as well.

My major concern is that the challenge or crisis goes deeper than what minor adjustments to the instruments required to fulfil the democratic functions are able to deliver. We experience a fundamental shift in thinking, and the political parties and their leaders are to some extent themselves responsible for the "mess" we are in.

For too long, politicians have presented globalisation as a positive phenomenon only. Trade and investments with fewer and fewer restrictions would create wealth for all of us, rich and poor. Today it is clear that sentiments of anti-globalisation fuel much of the "populist" energy that created panic and upsets in elections and referendums in Europe and the US in recent years.

In addition, humanity is confronted with the challenges of climate change, tax evasion by the rich and the global companies through tax shelters, rapidly increasing inequality of wealth, uncontrollable flows of refugees from civil wars and failed states and international terrorism, just to mention some examples.

No wonder that people are concerned and confused. No wonder that political parties and party leaders are concerned and confused as well. No wonder that all of us have difficulty seeing through the haze of fake news and social media communication pointing in all directions. Some of the developments we have considered positive in the area of communication may not be helpful for our democracies after all. At the very least, they make it more difficult than it used to be to manage a political party and to show the leadership required.

One conclusion must be that the environment in which parties and leaders operate has become more difficult and demanding. This means that the parties on one hand must revisit the basics of how a political party functions democratically, and on the other hand, the new environment demands out-of-the-box thinking and strong leadership of a calibre we rarely see these days. It also requires a willingness to collaborate across the spectrum of parties and ideologies.

Finally, citizens need to rethink and reposition themselves as well. Our belief that parties and their leaders can deliver solutions to all of the many challenges facing the nation state in a globalised world is not realistic; just like the solutions presented by the populist parties are not at all realistic, but purely ideological.

Democracy in Bhutan

Dr Brian C. Shaw

Too much has been written about democracy. Still, many in Bhutan (both before and after 2008) crave a closer understanding – an education - of the relevance of this new approach to public policy.

In this life, and in this age, we need to hone our abilities for change management. In overview, one may prefer the notion of "democracy with Bhutan characteristics" or "*Kidu* (Benefits granted by His Majesty The King of Bhutan) democracy". Looking ahead, perhaps we should look again at our villages and reflect on "*zomdu* democracy".

Why so? Here I gather some points, in no special order, and with folded hands ask for careful review by the reader.

Remember the core issue, His Majesty The Fourth King's constant and insistent focus[1]:

> What is going on in Bhutan is not democratisation as foreigners see it… I prefer not to talk of political changes as foreigners do - these are natural changes… It is very important for the people to understand why it is imperative that they govern themselves ... We can't impose things on them – they must come to understand themselves where their interest lies…

In this sense, Bhutan's "new democracy" - the constitution-making process, the constitution itself and, its prescribed modality of representative-selection with checks and balances, and indeed all that has come up from 2006 - are natural evolutions of native tendencies[2], accommodating to new circumstances and needs, at a conducive time.

The notion of the middle-path, of balance, is never absent, although this is always (and must be) a theme of aspiration rather than of completed strategy.

Democracy for Bhutan – even more than elsewhere - is and must be a process, not a fixed and unchanging set of rules, of self-evolution and self-government that is consistent with the *Tsa-wa-Sum* (The King, Country, and People).

1 Audience, 03 January 2002.

2 Note the perceptive article on native democracy, A proposition "Bhutan is a Democracy": Beyond the Constricted, Popular Wisdom of "Democracy", Katsu Masaki, Journal of Bhutan Studies, 29 (winter 2013), pp 2-34, at http://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt/journal-of-bhutan-studies-volume-29-winter-2013/

Democracy for Bhutan might indeed best be defined, at least academically, by what it is not. Yet, inevitably, in this life and in this society, there are bumps in the road.

After the June, 2018, meeting of the National Assembly, the "five in orange" – the former ministers from pre-2008 days, albeit now four and in opposition role - will retire. Ahead of the elections in the last quarter of 2018, Bhutan will indeed be entering a new phase of governance. Before 2008, there was the question of how Bhutan's civil servants would react to being given orders by "mere politicians". After all, the ministers up to March, 2008, were all civil servants, basically unaccountable except to His Majesty The King as Head of State.

What is now the Bhutan Consensus? Indeed, is there such? If not, how can the people's will be gathered and find expression, and how can the people – rather than one man or woman – control and direct their collective livelihoods and destiny? Is this even feasible, in a traditionally hierarchical society?

The starting point is the certain understanding of His Majesty The Fourth King (and his father before him, and His Majesty The King after him) that it was not good for the people to be ruled by one man. The process of political change to a constitutional system that was activated by His Majesty The Fourth King had been deeply considered. The Constitutional drafting process itself was comprehensive, but as noted by many it was not easy to fully understand.

A cogent commentary on Bhutan's prospects for democracy was published by Tashi Wangchuk before the present Constitution was decided and made effective in 2008[3]. The passage of a decade and a half has not diminished the relevancy and strength of his arguments but rather confirmed them as especially relevant today. He asserted, and elaborated, four theses:

1. Village society is fundamentally democratic
2. The state administration is bureaucratic and authoritarian
3. The state can be democratised by formalising customary institutions, and
4. Bhutan cannot be democratised by external forces.

Tashi Wangchuk also observed that

> The *zomdu*, by its very design, is an open forum for participation and negotiation, and all decisions are negotiated settlements, which at times may favour local elites but at other times can work against them …

3 Tashi Wangchuk, Asian Survey, XLIV, 6 (November/December 2004), pp 836-855.

> At the interface between village and state, or between the people and the state, the relationship is non-democratic… Social checks that are highly effective in controlling concentrations and abuses of power in the village have a limited ability to control power abuses by the state…[so] the village, in its relationship with the state, engages in strategic resistance.[4]

The essence of the democratic impulse is to constrain the power of the few by asserting the will and authority of the (informed) many (the public). If it exists at all, its roots must indeed be found in the *zomdu*; there is more to be said below.

The present Leader of the Opposition recently astutely observed that "we [MPs] are all accidental politicians". The two governments to date in constitutional Bhutan have been graduates (as all candidates for parliament must be) but often have had little detailed experience of public policy decision-making or indeed of the wider world of public affairs. Most have not come naturally to the notion of political accommodation.

The Committee system of the National Assembly has had only a middling success to date, in terms of power and authority delegated to the committees by the Assembly. While it is positive to note that reports from several committees are now publicly available, there are no reports from 5 of the 11 committees[5].

The rule of law is an essential component underlying any system claiming to be democratic. The former Chief Justice, Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye, did a very good job in renovating and strengthening basic structures and rules for the judicial hierarchy, but there still are too few strongly qualified and experienced legal persons, and there has been confusion in several cases in recent months. While the strengthening of the system proposed by the Bhutan Law School in Paro will be enhanced from 2020 when its first graduates appear, they too will need to gather several further years of practical experience to hone their academic knowledge. If public confidence flags for whatever reason, the door is widened for arbitrary misuse of authority and for injustice (with disaffection for authority) to grow.

The issues of devolution of power to the localities are still a work in progress. From bottom to top, it is encouraging to note the increasing use of social media (notably WeChat and others), which enable persons in rural areas to communicate with their MPs or even to become part of a circle of like-minded individuals to discuss matters of common interest. Social media in this case helps destroy the tyranny of distance and breaks down any sense of isolation.

4 Ibid., p 855.
5 http://www.nab.gov.bt/en/content/committee-reports

A View from Thailand

With the above considerations in mind, we can glance abroad. Not so long ago, the respected Thai elder statesman and former Prime Minister Khun Anand Panyarachun gave a wise and eloquent speech[6] to members of the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand, about some conditions for the "new normal" in his country. Despite the significant differences in the circumstances of the two countries, many of the comments are relevant to Bhutan. It is worth reviewing the main points. There were, he said, four essential elements of the "new normal" in the development of his country.

First, the need to ensure "sustainable and widespread" economic development, with closer attention to the quality rather than the quantity of economic growth.

Secondly, there should be promotion of "an open and inclusive society". He cited the American libertarian James Bovard's observation that "Democracy must be something more than a few wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for dinner".

> Liberty and equal rights are not simply about the right to vote. The demands and views of everyone must be heard and respected – not just those of the victors in elections. Majoritarian rule does not give a mandate to the winning party to do as it please in a winner-takes-all fashion.

Importantly, Khun Anand noted that the role of media in serving as "an unbiased and objective platform for voicing different views and perspectives in a balanced manner" was "critical".

The third element was respect for the rule of law: "We must have rule of law rather than rule by law", requiring respect for the spirit of the law as well as its underlying moral principles. "Where the rule of law is weak, corruption flourishes".

> An independent judiciary is fundamental for the rule of law. If judges use one law for the powerful and another for the powerless, the entire political and judicial system is compromised, and the people's trust in the government to see justice served is eroded.

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6 *Striving for a democratic 'new normal'*, full text in *Bangkok Post*, 24 March 2016.

Fourthly, there was "a need to recalibrate the balance of power between the state and the people".

> Governance through the rule of law together with public accountability and transparency form the basis of responsible government […] Representative government lies at the core of true democracy. It can occur only when there is comprehensive decentralisation and local political empowerment.

Khun Anand went on to stress that the success of decentralisation depended on a balanced and diverse flow of information:

> An active civil society provides a mechanism whereby the collective views of citizens can shape and influence government policy […] A vibrant civil society relies on the wisdom of the populace and its ability to make rational and informed decisions…

In this connection, he spoke of the need to "urgently reform our education system" into one that "nurtures the ability of people to think critically and make constructive changes in society".

In the case of Thailand, he observed, "we have paid little attention to developing the institutions that are critical to sustaining democracy".

Finally,

> A constitution is not a silver bullet for all that ails society […] society must first embrace the underlying values it espouses […] People must want democracy for it to take hold […] Democratic governance is ultimately a state of mind, rather than a set of tangible rules or procedures […] moving forward requires that we […] embrace openness, a diversity of views, as well as values that support societal change.

Overall, Khun Anand noted, the public should be mindful of the "sufficiency economy" espoused by the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej, "in terms of its key principles of moderation, rationality, and immunity".

If we swivel the mirror held by Khun Anand away from Thailand and onto Bhutan, is the picture much different? Are problems and prospects so dissimilar?

The "sufficiency economy" of the late King Rama IX is not so different in broadest outline from Gross National Happiness notion as it has evolved in

Bhutan – how to optimise limited resources to give maximum benefit to the people, how to optimise the talents of each person for the benefits of the community, and how the community itself may thrive with its component parts and provide effective feedback support, so that the whole community becomes indeed more than the sum of its parts.

As for economic development, new roads and electricity have helped enormously to advance communities. This, and urban construction, is good business for banks, but there are also consequences.

Second, an open and inclusive society. There is more work to be done.

Third, respect for the rule of law. There is certainly scope for improvement.

Fourth, "balance of power between the state and the people". The tendency of Thimphu-based politicians and officials is – more and more - to concentrate power and authority at the centre. Changing an institutional mindset is not easy to do. As the Germans acknowledged at the time of unprecedented refugee influx, "words have to be found" to understand and deal with this "new situation".

Not only have writers begun discussing the relevance of a "middle path" approach: they continue to tweet and blog[7] about it to growing audiences.

Overall, of course material progress has been made, yet much more needs to be done. There are costs. It is important that there be wider and more vigorous debate on these issues.

What is to be done? Electors may well scrutinise candidates for their individual strengths and utility, rather than their party affiliation; candidates may move from one party to another to enhance the likelihood of success at the polls; parties as such may become entities whose platforms are seen as almost identical leaking umbrellas and whose manifestos are worthless, full of self-serving and cynically false promises.

After 2008 there were voices raised from time to time yearning for a return to a consensus spirit.

7 The Community of Bhutanese Bloggers (CBB) lists 54 sites on its smart-phone app Bhutan Bloggers; the CBB also has a FaceBook presence (https://m.facebook.com/groups/1605595783044478/). Also, notably, Dorji Wangchuk has consistently proposed a middle path of journalism: see e.g. http://dorjiwangchuk.blogspot.hk/2015/10/middle-path-journalism-conceptual.html?m=1

The Bhutan Democratic Dialogue (BDD) proposed a non-conflictual approach to political competition. Yet more recently there are those to seek to impose a discussion-averse approach to important national issues. Thus, foreign affairs is an issue that concerns all citizens, at least in outline. Relations of Bhutan with its two large friendly neighbours deserves constant alertness. Bhutan has its own national interests, starting and ending with survival. She maintains friendship with both large neighbouring powers, even at a time when those powers seem unable or unwilling to resolve their differences, and the public of one or the other seek to suborn Bhutan exclusively to its side. The public must discuss, and should be kept well informed on, issues from abroad that may affect their security or livelihoods. In the contemporary context, this is a major task and responsibility of the print and visual media, and not to be shirked. The prospects for, and possible threats or limits to, Bhutan's sovereignty – including growth of extreme nationalistic tendencies in neighbouring societies - must be clearly understood by the public at large.

How to include the monk bodies in the broader body politic, deprived of a vote as they are? Their work and role has rather passive and ceremonial aspects. Attempts at reforms of the monk bodies made by His Majesty The Third King (and afterwards) foundered on conservative resistance by the then religious leaders. Is it again time to encourage those to find advantage in a more proactive involvement with society? It is no longer wholly admirable, in the eyes of a youthful society, to retreat to caves for mere personal fulfilment. As a start, let some be trained in basics of first-aid, for example. Religious ritual in this life would become more meaningful and lifted above mere superstition. *Lams* (lamas) and *anims* (nuns) would gain a new level of respect from the community for such work.

Overall, the Monarch guides, suggests, assists, aids, encourages, helps resolve, gives face, serves the short, medium and long-term interests of the whole community and its various people. The MPs – the people's representatives – are the vital filter of popular aspirations, and have both a duty of reception of local desires and a duty of informing local people of the broader context. The public themselves have the duty and obligation to rise above self-interests and consider the wider communal interests. How to achieve this? Education, an investment in the future as always remarked – not an investment in monetised robots.

The utility of the democratic ideal diminishes as a system unless the populace is well educated, "tuned in" (and focused on other than their mobile phones), alert to public policy and the wider world.

Pay the local officials and the MPs whatever is needed to curb or limit corruption: assert policies that constrain the short-term "advantages" of corruption.

Kidu and *Zomdu*

Kidu democracy and *zomdu* democracy support each other as institutions, and together they underpin "democracy with Bhutan characteristics". *Kidu* is the essence of the present stage of democracy with Bhutanese characteristics. The role of the Monarch is in effect as a benign parallel government, not at odds with the parliamentary political system but directly complementing it. *Kidu* democracy is the facilitator for *zomdu* democracy.

Zomdu is the institution for grassroots measurement and understanding of power. That involves understanding both the need for, and the utility of, political accommodation for a higher communal good. *Kidu* democracy and its institutions bolster – but do not replace – the ultimate source of political legitimacy. The role of political parties – ideally - is to channel the collective aspirations of the *zomdu* to the realm of public policy through the electoral representative system.

The tension between the individualism encouraged by the party system and the consensus encouraged by the *zomdu* system is ideally a creative tension, providing a dynamic context for civil society groups to articulate and focus their specialist interests and desires of public policy.

A Suggestion

In the not-far distant future, one may perhaps envisage a "*zhung zomdu*", not as "government *zomdu*" but indeed as a true "heart/central *zomdu*" coming together at national level, to assert a consensus resolution on carefully curated (by local leaders, not the centre) public issues of strategic import in all spheres. These discussions and decisions might enhance the content of any future five-year plans, and could directly inform the politicians of their proper role as agents of popular desires on national policy. Politicians would be able to make their own inputs to the discussions. Such a "new Bhutan Consensus" would naturally be subject to further periodic refinement as circumstances evolved. The *zhung zomdu* would not compete with or threaten the responsibilities of the elected "agents of change" but would enhance the unspoken social contract between the public and these agents: a consensus on an issue would constitute a new *genja* (agreement).

Strengthening and extending the role of *zomdus* does not mean treading the path of India's ill-fated 1960s Panchayati Raj programme that by 1970 had failed (for reasons worth noting):

> Firstly, the bureaucracy, local vested interests and the elected representatives in [State Legislature and Parliament] did not take kindly to the [Panchayati Raj Institutions], whose ascendancy they feared. Secondly, since the Panchayats were created … as vehicles for rural development rather than as units of self-government, they had no real autonomy […] Third, there was a strong tendency in India […] to concentrate power at the Centre to an excessive degree. […] Fourthly, many state governments [failed to] hold elections to the PRIs for years together under one pretext or the other. […] Fifthly, there was also a feeling that PRIs [were] dominated by […] privileged sections of society […] Finally, […] even the local people themselves were not adequately educated to understand the role and the importance of the PRIs.[8]

In Bhutan, one should not quickly underestimate the wisdom of the rural people on issues that count. In the past, there has been a relative lack of intellectual articulation on major public issues, perhaps as a function of the diminished level of education, or an absence of a clear sense of national history, or the country's relative isolation, or the stress on "localism" as the focus of attention.

Conclusion

Khun Anand has indirectly held a mirror to contemporary Bhutan as well as to his own Kingdom. The question is: what is to be done? Our Kings have asserted that "we well know what the problems are. What we need to know is, what are the best solutions."

- The people should "take ownership" of politicians.
- Experienced and fledgling politicians should renew their understanding that their role is to serve the people – that is, the interests of the community rather than the individual (or themselves).
- A *zhung zomdu*, well prepared and carried out with all the time needed for its good grounding and success, could give colour and strength to an especially Bhutanese form of democracy, reflecting the best of historic culture and local practice.

8 Palanithurai, Ganapathy (ed.) Dynamics of New Panchayati Raj System in India, Vol. IIII, Select states (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2004), pp. 112-113.

> If it came to prove itself and flourish with time, this dynamic institution could make a major contribution to democracy with Bhutanese characteristics and further enhance the practical basis for governance under the over-arching philosophy of Gross National Happiness.

Perhaps an ideal to be worked towards can be found in the Swiss polity, where:

> Voters tend to see politics as being about functions and institutions, not about personalities […] politicians are judged above all on their ability to forge consensus and execute decisions.[9]

Could this also come to be true for Bhutan? That would surely be well received by Their Majesties and by The People. It is a goal to be cherished and worked towards.

9 Tett, Gillian, "Notebook", *Financial Times Weekend*, 03 March 2018 p.8.

Dhar from the Throne: an Honour and a Responsibility

Dasho Kinley Dorji

The 203 gups (heads of county) who received the *Dhar* (scarf symbolising confer of rank) from His Majesty The King in October 2016, are negotiating a new era in Bhutanese politics. As one gup, a veteran of more than 20 years as a village headman, described it: "The situation between my early days and now is like the difference between the earth and the sky."

This refers to both the political scenario that they are adjusting to as well as the profile of the gups themselves. It is not a comparison of two stages of recent Bhutanese history. It would be wrong to conclude that the current status of local government is "better" than the rural politics of the past. It would be equally wrong to surmise that the university graduate gup of today is more capable than the village elder of the past who assumed the post because he was trusted by the people. It is just that the criteria, like the concept of functional literacy, is changing with the times.

Gups of the past served their communities by drawing from the wisdom accumulated from their own and society's experiences. There were dynamic gups who made a difference to their villages, gewogs (blocks), and dzongkhags (districts), and there were those who were apologies for rural leadership.

The political scenario today is by no means settled, and the role of the gup is as complex as that of Bhutanese leadership at all levels - complex given our limited experience in "government by the people", and complex because we are learning by doing. The electoral process itself is a major task, and His Majesty The King personally congratulated all the citizens who took part in the democratic process as candidates and voters in the local government elections, a multi-million Ngultrum exercise.

A majority of the 203 men and two women who were elected in the last elections are new, but there has been a demographic shift. In the past, many literate gups were disrobed monks. Today, there are 25 university graduates, one with a postgraduate degree. The rest are "functionally literate", meaning that they can read and write. One gup, who remembers being paid Nu 450 a month when he began his career, is getting Nu 20,000 today.

It is an opportunity of a lifetime, and on October 12, 2016, these elected local government leaders received the honour of being conferred the *Dhar* by His Majesty The King. This signifies the importance of the responsibilities of local government and leaders on the ground. But, more importantly — as His Majesty The King has repeatedly commanded — it symbolises the importance of their roles and their responsibilities to their communities and to the *Tsa-wa-Sum* (The King, country, and people).

The responsibility of the local government is outlined in the Constitution. Local leaders are empowered "to facilitate the direct participation of the people in the development and management of their own social, economic, and environmental well-being". In other words, they play a critical role in keeping democracy alive.

The advantage of having local leaders is that local interests are taken into account in the national sphere of governance. His Majesty The King advised the gups to ensure the involvement of the people and communities in the democratic process by encouraging them to take active interest in matters of local governance.

It is expected that local leaders know local issues better than the central authorities. At the same time, the proximity gives the people the opportunity to keep the elected leaders accountable. It is healthy that local leaders will be constantly challenged over their decisions. That is what accountability is all about and that is why their incentives have been enhanced.

But central government leaders, politicians, bureaucrats, employees of constitutional posts, and the citizens of our new democracy need to understand the real mandate. Unlike societies that experimented with democracy for decades, ours is an overnight initiative, with formal training being improvised along the way. Gups, mangmis, other Gewog Tshogdu (Block Committee)/ Dzongkhag Tshogde (District Council) members, clerks, accountants, and administrative officers in gewogs, and the dzongkhag administrators need new skills and knowledge, management systems and styles, processes, benchmarking, communications, organisational culture, motivation, equipment, and resources.

Our decentralisation is yet to mature and there are many challenges.

Just as the elected officials are close to the people, they are also vulnerable to influences themselves. They are straddling a triangle of politicians, civil servants, and the people.

The politicians will push party interests and make promises that are sometimes beyond the government-approved Plans. This is evident in the vehement view of one gup that the gewog-level political branches did more harm than good. Being apolitical could be relegated to a mere theory in our new political system, given the personalised relationships within Bhutanese society.

Sometimes bureaucrats are not much easier to deal with, because they consider themselves better qualified and as being "above" local officials. Local leaders and the people are made to manoeuvre through the bureaucratic maze and work can be delayed for long periods. The tensions between elected leaders and gewog administrative officers are yet to be cleared.

Gups are also constantly negotiating with the people – voters - who are getting more demanding, having more access to political leaders. As one gup ruefully puts it, there is nobody who has no needs and everyone expects their own priorities to be attended to.

Incentives enjoyed by the local leaders include the Gewog Development Grant and Boleros. It is also a reality that, as much as the facilities are better than ever before, the risks are greater. His Majesty The King therefore emphasised the importance of the rule of law and the need for local leaders to be acutely conscious of the risks of corruption and fraud.

For women, the trials are greater. "The people don't trust us," said one of the two women who were elected. Voters are used to male leaders like village headmen and mang-aps. Interestingly, she was elected on her campaign promise that she would do something about the growing number of listless youth in the countryside. That's one herculean task.

As implementers, gups need to contribute to as well as understand and follow the development Plans. As decision makers with more and more funds, they need to prioritise local issues and allocate funds where it is critical. But in today's scenario, they can also reduce divides and bring people together. They are the real bridge between the politicians, civil servants, and the people. His Majesty The King reminded the gups of their larger responsibility on the path of nation-building, keeping in mind the most important national priorities: Security and sovereignty of Bhutan, peace, harmony and unity of the people, and our customs and traditions.

It is not in vain that our legislation procedures are still going through a painful process. The Gewog Yargye Tshogchhung and Dzongkhag Yargye Tshogdu *chathrims* (acts) have been drafted, enacted, modified and refined since 2003. As *throms* (towns) emerged and grew in urbanising Bhutan, their local

governance became pertinent, and a separate *chathrim* was developed and later consolidated with the legislation guiding DTs and GTs. Legislation has been passed and retracted. New contradictions have emerged with every debate. The Election Commission of Bhutan has had differences with parliament and the government. In fact, the Act needed a royal assent to be passed.

Bhutan's democracy is maturing under the benevolent eye of the Monarch. And, on October 12, 2016, His Majesty The King reminded the gups, as well as the Bhutanese population, that local government is not the lowest level of government, as it is sometimes misconceived. On the contrary, it is the most important level of government, because local leaders are the nearest and closest level of government to the people. Local governments are indispensable avenues for participation in democracy and development. In the long run, the success of democracy in Bhutan will be determined by the success of local governments.

The Micro Effect of Democratisation in Rural Bhutan

Strained Community Relations

Tshering Eudon

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[1]: 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

1 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 Prezworski, 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.[2] Eva Bellin also mentions strong civil society, democratic neighbours, and democratic culture as possibly being the prerequisites of democracy.[3] This is because a collective force of the civil society keeps government accountable for its performances in the country.[4]

Furthermore, the democratic neighbour and high literacy are also found to be the prerequisites of the transition or the sustainability of democracy.[5] 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 Prezworski, "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.[6] 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.[7]

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

6 *Bhutan Poverty Analysis 2012* (2013): 17
7 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.[8]

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.[9]

This higher agricultural productivity through modern technologies and modernisation have helped people escape poverty as they no longer have to do underpaid work.[10] 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.[11] 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.[12] For example, one of my interviewees

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

9 Interview: Tshogpa; 1st August; on the way to Merak

10 Interview; Mangmi; 26th July; Radhi

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

12 Interview; Mangmi, Dungzhay; 24th July Phongmey, 26th July Radhi

said his knowledge of democracy had improved through various awareness programmes on television, and interactions with party candidates.[13]

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.[14] 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.[15]

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,[16] mobile connectivity, better toilets and safe drinking water,[17] and awareness programmes, especially on education and health.[18]

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.[19] The living standards have also improved with the cancellation of 120 days *woolag*[20], 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[21], 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; 29th July, Radhi
14 Interview; Gup, Community Tshogpa, Mangmi, Gup, Tshogpa; 24th July, Phongmey, 29th July, Radhi
15 Interview; Mangmi, Tshogpa; 24th July Phongmey, 29th July Radhi
16 Contributed by Kuensel, RAO Information. "Electricity expected to reach the highland areas."
17 Interview; Community Tshogpa, Farmer; 2nd August, Merak, 5th 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; 6th 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.[22] 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.[23]

In other words, "wealthy and talkative" tshogpas persuaded voters to join their party or forced them to support their party.[24] There were even cases of tshogpas deliberately creating disputes and filing cases against voters if they did not support their parties.[25] 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[26]. People seemed to be brainwashed by the tshogpas, leading to disputes, quarrels, and polarisation.[27]

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."[28]

Farmers in this gewog were once living from hand to mouth[29], 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 form 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; 2nd August; Merak, 6th August, Sakteng, 3rd August, Sakteng, 4th August, Sakteng, 6th August, Sakteng

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

24 Interview; Mangmi; 6th August; Sakteng

25 Interview; Mangmi; 6th August; Sakteng

26 Interview; Mangmi; 6th August; Sakteng

27 Interview; Community Tshogpa; 7th August; Sakteng

28 Rai, Kuensel, 2003

29 Interview; Mangmi; 26th 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.[30]

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

Furthermore, the *Shinang Tshogpa* has been formed among neighbouring villages to help families during the death of a member.[33] 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.[34] This especially helps the poor who cannot afford to cremate deceased members and it also contributes labour, especially during the busy agricultural season.[35] 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 *lhakhangs*[36] where the communities rotationally organise religious ceremonies on auspicious days, at least five religious times a year.[37]

30 Interview; Village Monk, 2 Farmer; 27th July, Radhi
31 Interview; 2 Farmers; 27th July, Radhi, 29th July, Radhi
32 Interview; Village Monk, Farmer; 27th July, Radhi
33 Interview; Farmer, Village Monk, Farmer, Shopkeeper; 27th July, Radhi, 29th July, Radhi
34 Interview; Farmer, Village Monk; 27th July, Radhi
35 Interview; 2 Farmers, Shopkeeper; 27th July, Radhi, 29th July, Radhi
36 *Lhakhang*: it is also like a temple, but it belongs to whole community members.
37 Interview; 6 Farmers; 22nd July, Radhi, 27th July, Radhi, 29th 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[38]. Hence, community religious programmes appear to have kept community members associated, which would explain the less party polarisation among the voters in Radhi.

II b. ***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.[39] 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; 29th 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.[40] 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.[41] 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.

40 Interview; Mangmi; 6th August, Sakteng
41 Interview; Civil Servant; 2nd 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.

For references visit www.drukjournal.bt

The Thromde Elections: an Inadequate Constituency?

Ugyen Penjore

Whose City? Whose Thrompon?

Last summer, like in most summers, numerous potholes appeared in the stretch of road below the Kuensel office at Changzamtog. When it rained, water overflowed from the storm drainage and poured onto the road, filling the potholes. It became a trap for motorists.

Those plying the road cursed the thromde (municipal), responsible for the upkeep of the city infrastructure. As I am a resident and a voter from Babesa, South Thimphu, friends living or working in Thimphu chided me. They would ask me to "tell your thrompon (mayor)" to fix this or "resign if he can't maintain a road in the capital city".

Their frustration is valid.

Even if people have lived and worked a good part of their lives in the capital city, they have no right to vote for representation in the thromde council or for the thrompon unless they have their census in the municipality.

Down south in Phuentsholing, a commercial hub and gateway to the country, the city traffic is completely chaotic. There is no parking space, even as the number of vehicles surges daily. It did not rain this winter and the town soon became a dust bowl. Residents claimed that they could literally see dust in the air they breathed. They resorted to masks.

In Samdrup Jongkhar, residents have only one wish — a reliable and clean drinking water supply. They have heard of several projects for decades. All they want is a leader who can translate these projects into a 24-hour water supply. The rest can wait.

Meanwhile, Gelephu is blessed with flat land. Landowners want the thromde to speed up opening the local area plans for development. Residents know the potential of the thromde. They are waiting.

After two rounds of elections, or nearly a decade of decentralising the management of thromdes to an elected thrompon and a council of elected representatives, the issues that urban Bhutan have to grapple with have not changed much. Some say things have worsened.

Bhutan had, at least in some towns, thrompons for many years. The thrompon of the past was a beleaguered figure, a senior civil servant whose main task was to deal with complaints, particularly concerning land. The thrompon was also looked upon as a disciplinarian, feared mostly by illegal street vendors.

In 2011 when, for the first time, four thromdes elected their thrompon and a council under a democratic set-up, social expectations soared. There was optimism that an elected mayor would turn things around. There were expectations that thromde residents would fully partake in electing their mayor. Hopes were high that an elected mayor with his elected team would bring an end to the never-ending problems in the thromdes.

Issues were highlighted and priorities were tabled as candidates campaigned for the office. Water shortage and overflowing drains, garbage and sewerage, increasing vehicles and shrinking parking space, housing shortage and illegal settlements — the list ran long. The first batch of thrompons elected was supposedly the right persons to turn these problems into opportunities.

Who Elects the Thrompon?

Not many. The responsibility to pick the "right candidate" fell on a handful of residents who had civil registration in the constituency. Thousands of Bhutanese who live and work in the towns, who depend on the thromde's services and pay for some of them, have no say. In a big city like Thimphu, many see the tiny pool of votes as not being representative, with about 98,140 (BLSS 2017) residents deprived of the right to choose the mayor of the city they live in.

The first thromde election on January 21, 2011, saw a 50.76 percent voter turnout, but this is not much in actual numbers. There were 8,462 registered voters in the four thromdes. Only 4,295 turned up at the polls. The capital city witnessed 1,335 people elect the mayor. It was fewer in Phuentsholing, a town with an estimated resident population of 25,000, where 182 of the 617 eligible voters elected the thrompon of this busiest of border towns. In Samdrup Jongkhar, 140 people elected their thrompon (Kuensel January 26, 2011).

If the number of voters were few, the candidates were even fewer. Thimphu and Gelephu thromdes did not have enough tshogpa (representative) candidates, and it took the Election Commission of Bhutan some effort to assure residents that the Thromde Council could function without all its members.

Five years later, when more residents and members of extended families would have reached the age to exercise their franchise, the second thromde election was a disaster in terms of participation. The capital city's incumbent thrompon had no rivals. Phuentsholing thromde also had a lone candidate.

Despite an increase in the number of eligible voters, by 1,049 (Kuensel 2016), only 31 percent or 2,557 of the 7,278 registered voters took part, including 150 who did not want the thrompon for a second term in Thimphu. Thimphu thromde, extending from Changtagang in the north to Ngabirongchu in the south, saw fewer than 10 percent of the population — 2,107 people — elect the thrompon and his team[1].

In Phuentsholing, the lone candidate did not win by a huge majority. There were 239 votes against him. He won by a narrow margin of nine "yes' votes. Gelephu, with three candidates, fared better with a 61 percent turnout, or 677 voters out of 1,121.

Developing Urban Bhutan

Bhutan's capital is not an old town. As a late-comer, the capital city had the opportunity to be the most beautiful town. There were ample lessons to be learnt from mistakes early developers made where, for instance, serene hill stations and lush paddy fields were transformed into ugly towns.

Keeping in mind the changing demographics, landscape, and future prospects, a long-term (25-year) plan was drawn. The Thimphu Structure Plan (2003-2027) provides guidelines for the development of the capital city.

Based on the concept of intelligent urbanism, the plan was to balance development with nature and heritage, making it convivial and efficient. Detailed strategies were laid out. The plan aimed to make Thimphu a dream city by 2027, providing residents with adequate space to work, drive, jog, cycle, picnic, relax and be close to nature, while preserving traditional Bhutanese aesthetics.

1 Thromde tshogde consists of not less than seven and not more than 10 elected members including the thrompon.

Unfortunately, Thimphu is not any closer to that vision. Fourteen years into the Plan, the irony of Thimphu's development is that it is now quoted as an example for "a study relevant for government and international development partners for understanding policy implementation failures"[2].

In less than a decade, what is evident is the loss of greenery through a feverish concretisation of paddy fields from Ngabirongchu to Changtagang. The growth has been haphazard and confused. Commercial priorities and the need for more space led to the tearing down of traditional architecture, except for the two *dzongs* and the few monasteries.

The city itself has become a veritable monster. It lacks affordable housing; water for domestic use is a constant problem; the crime rate has soared over the years; urban sanitation is poor; and people live amidst piling garbage. There is no efficient public transport and the rush hour traffic has begun. The concept of zoning has become a joke. In short, Thimphu is fast becoming a distressed capital city.

The implementation of the Plan began well before the first thromde election in 2011 so it is unfair to blame the thromde council or the thrompon entirely. But, with the transition to local governance, there were expectations that the decentralisation of power would include the local populace in shaping the growth of the city they live and work in.

The mayor and the council were expected to play a crucial role in determining the present and future course of development of the town and the community. However, in implementing decisions or plans, consultations were restricted to landowners, considered the main stakeholders, excluding a majority of the resident population.

Residential Voting?

Should we then let residents have a say by extending the voting right to them?

Yes, say many.

Electoral laws right now are restrictive. To be eligible to cast a vote in the thromde election, people have to be "registered in the civil registry and have the *gung* (unique household number) or *mitsi* (civil registration in that place" (Election Act, 2008). To have a *gung* and *mitsi*), a person should own landed property. This automatically disqualifies those who have lived in a thromde for decades but do not own landed property.

2 Thimphu's Growing Pains, challenges of implementing the city plan, Manka Bajaj, 2013

From the experience of the two elections, there is a need to boldly revisit certain legal provisions to allow all urban residents to vote. The argument is that people who depend on the thromde services, pay for them, and are affected by the decision of the thromde, should be allowed to vote. This, they argue, would represent a wider spectrum of the people in the thromde, rather than a handful of landowners participating in what seems like bourgeois politics.

According to records with the National Land Commission, there are about 3,670 landowners within the thromde. Assuming five as the average size of a landowner's family, with three above the age of 18, there are only about 11,000 eligible voters. Given past experiences, even if 50 percent turn up for the polls, only about 5,500 people would be electing the thrompon.

In an urban election, policy and electoral decisions made at the local level matter because it is a political sphere that touches regularly and deeply the daily lives of residents[3]. The rule, many feel, should change to be inclusive. "How can a handful of people decide issues and policies that affect thousands?" asks a Thimphu resident who owns a building, but has his *mitsi* in Punakha. The elected thrompon should work towards ensuring inclusiveness.

There is no study to see if voter turnout is a central component driving local policy decisions. For instance, there are suspicions that the elected mayor could prioritise his voters' concerns to keep his vote bank safe. The feeling is that the thrompon, although "apolitical", is a politician and will represent the interests of his support base. He is seen as being directly accountable to people who voted him or her into office. The rest does not matter to him. "How fair is that in a democracy where the essence is about majority?" argues another resident who has lived 20 years in Thimphu. "What makes me ineligible after I have lived in a particular city for 20 years?" The questions are many.

Restricting voting rights to residents with registered census also means discouraging participation in the elections. There is an argument that allowing every resident to vote would mean a bigger pool of candidates. Participation could be for thrompon or the council members. An analysis of news articles (Kuensel 2011, 2016) of the two thromde elections indicates that there is widespread apathy among the registered residents regarding participation in the elections. Some were "forced" to join, while others joined on the "behest" of the people. Finding tshogpa candidates has been a challenge. In the Thimphu election, there were no thrompon candidates from two of the most urbanised constituencies, Changangkha and Motithang.

3 Where Turnout Matters: The Influence of Turnout on Local Government Spending, Zoltan Hajnal, 2012

Will Allowing All Residents to Vote Make a Difference?

The answer is mixed.

Experience in major towns elsewhere shows that turnout does matter. Participation could increase if people with property but without registered *mitsi* are allowed to exercise their franchise. "There would be more candidates and the competition would be healthy," says a businessman who constructed a four-storey building in Olakha.

Since urban areas have a more educated population, residents say they could question the promises and polices of the aspiring candidates and choose wisely. A study on voter turnout and its impact on policy decisions could provide useful indicators. Participation is critical in the formulation of polices that includes all, even the urban homeless or the disadvantaged.

The pluralist model of urban politics maintains that local governments are open to influence from a wide range of groups, and anticipate reactions of groups to policy choices[4]. Therefore, to ensure that decisions are of public interest or preference, the independence of the council, headed by the mayor, is deemed important. The council members are bound by the same voter interest. If residents are to enjoy better planning or growth, residents must sit on the council. Decisions today, for instance, are made by members of the council some of whom cannot read or interpret simple maps.

In Bhutan's urban planning, two interest groups are identified — the residents and the landowners. The residents want open space, good parks, and roads. The landowners do not want to part with their land. They therefore sabotage good plans. One group is driven by the desire for quality of life; the other wants to make the most of the land it owns. It is here that the role of the elected thrompon and the council becomes critical. But when they are accountable only to the landowners (voters), good planning could be compromised. Planners say urbanisation is at the heart of civilisation in today's context. It is a global trend that the number of people living in the urban areas will only increase.

In an ideal situation, to provide checks and balances to the council, there should be representation, with equal rights, say, from experts like planners, architects, designers and retired civil servants who have lived all their lives in the thromde. This can happen when voting rights are extended to residents without landed property or *mitsi*.

4 Where Turnout Matters: The Influence of Turnout on Local Government Spending, Zoltan Hajnal, 2012

Landowners alone will therefore not influence the council. "You know the river is flowing in the wrong direction, but you can't do anything," says a planner who attended council meetings as an observer. "If we have a say, we can challenge wrong decisions."

At a time of policy devolution, when more and more policies are both initiated and implemented at the local level, the decisions of local governments are increasingly important. The thromdes will only grow both in size and population. It is estimated that, by 2020, 50 percent of Bhutanese will be living in urban areas (Thromde Finance Policy 2012). That's why we must develop more towns, including yenlag (satellite) towns. There is the need to have another look at our policies and legislation. There will be no room for discussions, choice, or discourse once more villages are turned into concrete jungles. It will be a shame to repeat the same mistakes.

Sustainability of the Thromde

Critics argue that a local government without financial authority will have no power to implement policies. Municipalities need to be empowered not only through votes, but also through financial autonomy. Local governments today, in addition to the revenues collected through taxes, fees, and service charges, depend on earmarked budgetary support from the central government.

There are many ways local governments can affect local policy. One way is through fiscal decisions like raising money via higher taxes, charges, and fees or even incurring greater debt. However, there are restrictions. The land tax in Thimphu thromde, for instance, is based on unit and not on land value. In other words, the tax on a commercial unit in Norzin Lam and Olakha is the same although the value of land is immensely different. Thimphu landowners pay land tax based on outdated policy (Taxation Policy, 1992), which does not capture many aspects of realities of thromde governance. After nearly two decades, the rate is Nu 0.50 per square foot (commercial land) and Nu 0.25 per square foot in residential areas.

The Thromde Finance Policy has a noble intention. It is intended to support and assist thromdes to establish sound financial management practices, to strive towards financial sustainability and self-reliance, within the principles of decentralisation, economy, equity, efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, and accountability (Thromde Finance Policy, 2012). An elected mayor or the council will be pursuing a populist policy by not revising fees or taxes. Even if they propose a policy, there are limitations: It needs the approval of the Finance Ministry or the Parliament.

Non-voting residents agree that fees could be increased if services are improved. "Not many would feel the pinch of paying Nu 500 a month for regular and reliable waste collection," says one. The lack of services is summed up by a resident who said his children grew up in his sitting-room because of lack of services and amenities. "(Our) urban children are becoming prisoners in their own homes."

Thromdes could raise funds from increased local taxes, fees, and services charges. This will happen when the mayor is answerable, not only to a group of landowners, but to its residents as well, including tenants. Without financial authority, the elected government at the centre would jeopardise the noble vision of the local government. Some residents believe that, ideally, thromdes should be able to sustain themselves by raising their own revenue without having to be answerable to the voters and the central government.

To allow residential voting, electoral laws must change. Bhutan's electoral laws were enacted and implemented without the wisdom of foresight. After several rounds of elections, both parliamentary and local government, there is a need to amend the Election Act of 2008. One provision that needs amendment concerns voting rights. The Constitution guarantees the right to vote, but restricts voters with the provision of having to be registered in a constituency for at least a year, "to prevent fraud and gerrymandering"[5].

Chance for Change

A Kuensel online poll, still active when this article was written, asked its readers what Thimphu thromde should prioritise in the 12th Plan. The options were water shortage, bad roads, parking issues, and all of the above. Some 68 percent (586) of those who voted said "all of the above". This is an indication that the thromde needs to improve all its services.

The next local government election is three years away. Time is on our side. It is imperative to revisit relevant legislations if our policymakers are to allow residential voting for inclusiveness and broad-based participation in deciding the quality of life in a city.

5 The Constitution of Bhutan, principles and philosophies, Sonam Tobgye, 2016

Socio-economic Status and Electoral Participation in Bhutan

Kinley

Bhutan transitioned to a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy in 2008 and conducted its first parliamentary elections. In the words of former Chief Justice of Bhutan, Sonam Tobgye, the chairman of the then Constitution Drafting Committee, 'Democracy in Bhutan is truly a result of the desire, aspiration and complete commitment of the monarchy to the well-being of the people and the country.'(Gallenkamp 2010). Since 1907, successive kings have planned the path of democratisation through modernisation and development, underpinned by Bhutan's unique socio-economic, cultural and political settings. His Majesty The Fourth Druk Gyalpo proclaimed that 'I do not believe that the system of absolute monarchy, wholly dependent on one individual, is a good system for the people in the long-run. Eventually, no matter how carefully royal children are prepared for their role, the country is bound to face misfortune of inheriting a King of dubious character.' *(Sinpeng 2007).*

As an important step towards democratisation, decentralisation of planning, devolved decision-making, and local development were initiated to provide first-hand experience in devolved local governance and development. These measures ensured that people could effectively participate in decision-making with the right to voice their hopes, aspirations and concerns in governance and development. The decentralisation of authority and responsibility was initiated in 1981 with the introduction of the Dzongkhag Yargye Tshogdu (District Council), responsible for development planning at the district level. With further decentralisation in 1991 to the gewog (county level), decision making and participation reached the grassroots level. This process of decentralisation provided the people to express their views and participate directly or indirectly in the decision making process. A gradual transition to decentralisation, participatory planning and grass root engagement has ultimately prepared the Bhutanese people to assume bigger roles in governance. In 1998, as a major step toward democratisation, a new Council of Ministers was elected by the members of the erstwhile National Assembly and were given all executive powers that were previously the prerogatives of the Kings.

In 2001, through a Royal Decree, the drafting of the Constitution was commanded with the aim to ensure the sovereignty and security of Bhutan as a nation-state and to pave a future for Bhutan that is collectively decided and trodden. The need for a Constitution as per the Royal Decree was to establish a dynamic system of governance which would uphold the true principles of democracy and by which the collective will of the people of Bhutan will prevail in governance and in pursuit of development. The Constitution of Bhutan is the Supreme Law of the State and states that Bhutan shall become a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy, with elected government and parliament running the day-to-day affairs of governance and enacting laws. Thus, in preparation for Bhutan to become a democracy, the constitutional office of the Election Commission of Bhutan was established to oversee the preparation, maintenance, supervision, direction, control, and conduct of democratic elections, besides the establishment of the other offices of the constitutional post-holders.

It might be pointed here that, starting from 2002 onwards, the Gewog representatives were elected through secret ballots cast by voters over the age of 21 years and older, which truly entrenched in the Bhutanese people the concept of elections and voting.

In 2008, Bhutan became the then world's youngest democracy having completed the conduct of the first ever parliamentary elections which saw a high voter turnout of 79.45 percent in a non-compulsory electoral system. In spite of the progressive and improved social and economic conditions of the Bhutanese people under the benevolent rule of successive monarchs, democratisation was neither the result of an impulsive desire nor a compulsive process of political change.

As Bhutan embarks on its third general elections in 2018, the whole world has its eyes on Bhutan, keenly observing the nascent democracy blossom to its right conditions. However, if the last general elections are any indication, there is higher voter apathy among Bhutanese voters and a decline in the voter participation could cost our democracy fortunes. So, what is next? Can Bhutanese be complacent and not bother about this important political process and participation? What are some of the impending parameters that deter electoral participation in Bhutan? The successive democratic governments have availed its opportunity to serve the people with best of ability within a limited resource. While political discourse remains superficial and politics primarily personal, every individual has the constitutional duty to cast their adult franchise and make responsible decision to elect the "best party" of their choice.

Globally, the low rate of electoral participation is linked to socio-economic factors such as income level, education level and political affinity. Bhutan is no different on this front and a study thereof has been undertaken to identify factors that affect electoral participation in Bhutan. Based on the Election Commission of Bhutan's survey data on 'the study of the determinants of voter's choice and women's participation in elective offices, 2014', the socioeconomic status has been identified as being a strong predictor of electoral participation. The findings from this study is expected to provide the relevant agencies in addressing the issues that would help increase the voter turnout in 2018 general elections.

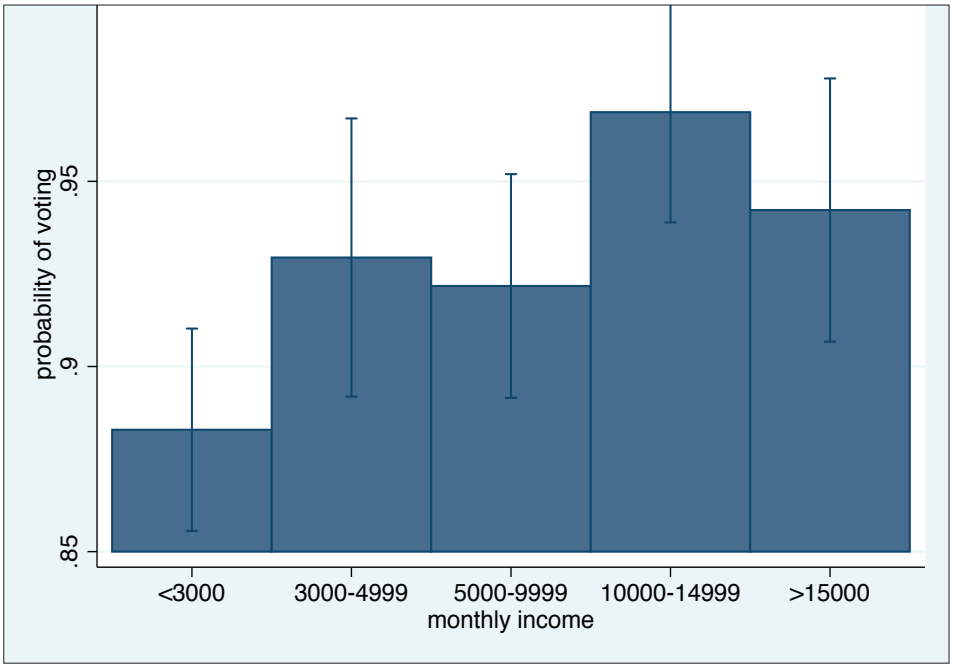
Income

According to several studies, income—that determines social status and economic prosperity—plays an important role in understanding voter participation (Brady et al. 1995; Lassen 2005; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Theory suggests that poor and marginalised voters are less likely to vote (Brady et al. 1995; Lijphart 1999). This is due to associated costs involved in the participation process. Also, higher levels of economic status and development, translated through higher income, have a positive relation in understanding the importance and consequences of voting that encourage greater participation.

Some believe that even in relatively equal societies, richer people are more likely to participate in politics than those with lesser economic resources. Higher income individuals are more likely to have larger networks, and they are more likely to talk about politics more frequently within their networks (Lake and Huckfeldt 1998).

Income is a strong predictor of electoral participation in Bhutan. Wealthier people, on average, are found to be more likely to vote than poorer people. This is consistent with findings of earlier studies in developed countries. The income variable used in the econometric model was categorised into five groups with less than Nu. 3,000 as poorest and a baseline for comparison. The estimation results indicate that people whose income is higher than the poorest group are more likely to participate.

Figure 1: **Predicted probability of voting and income levels**



Education

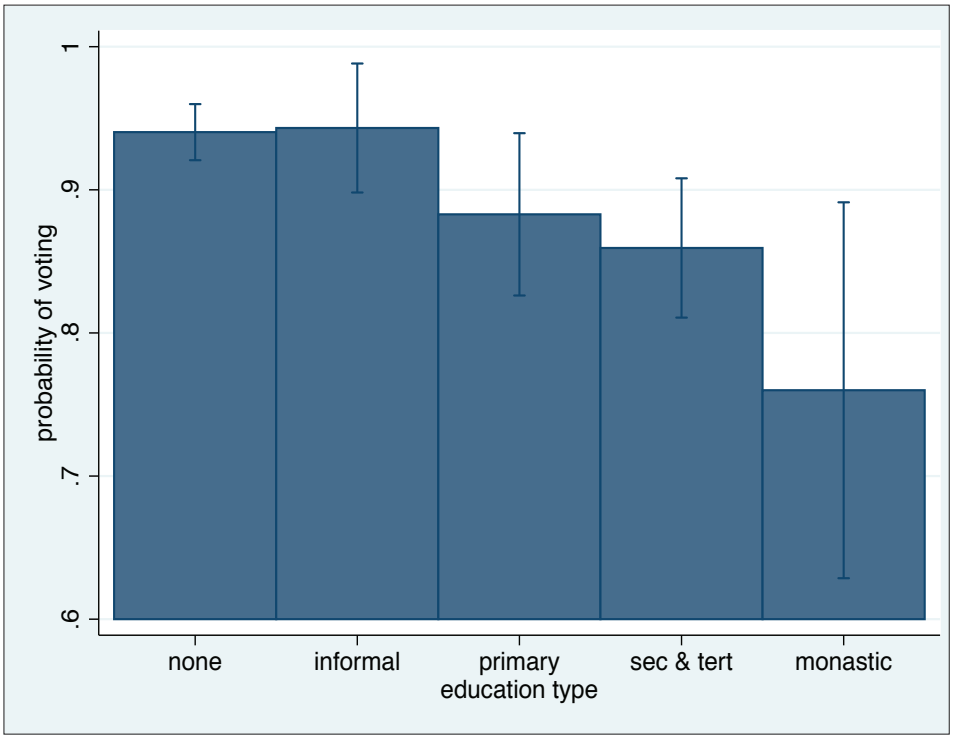
Lake and Huckfeldt (1998) argue that education has a positive correlation to participation. The higher levels of education are also associated with reducing the cost of participation that provides incentives to engage in the electoral process. A qualified citizen is in a better position in terms of skills and knowledge to understand the complexity of the political system and assimilate information for effective participation. However, education produces different outcomes for developing countries and the recent studies suggest that an increase in the level of education does not necessarily increase electoral participation (Kolstad and Wiig 2016).

Education, despite being a strong predictor of voting, has produced different results in Bhutan. In contrast to the general findings that better educated people are more likely to participate, education in Bhutan is negatively correlated with electoral participation. It is found that with an increase in the level of education, people are less likely to participate in voting. The informal education groups are seen to vote slightly higher than the no education group as per Figure 2, but the difference is not statistically significant. My field experience, as an electoral officer for the last 10 years, suggests that this result is consistent with practical reality in Bhutan for several reasons.

Firstly, Bhutan follows an electoral registration system based on a civil registry rather than based on residency and accordingly voters can only vote from and in the places of their civil registry. This has a significant impact on people who work outside of their places of civil registry and these people are usually educated, working in cities and towns. These educated people are most unlikely to travel back to their villages to cast votes, either due to the distance or the associated cost of voting.

And secondly, the educated working people, in particular public servants, are barred from having affiliations to political parties since public servants cannot have political mandates and affiliations as per the existing laws. This is seen as a major deterrent for active participation among the educated group.

Figure 2: **Predicted probability of voting and levels of education**



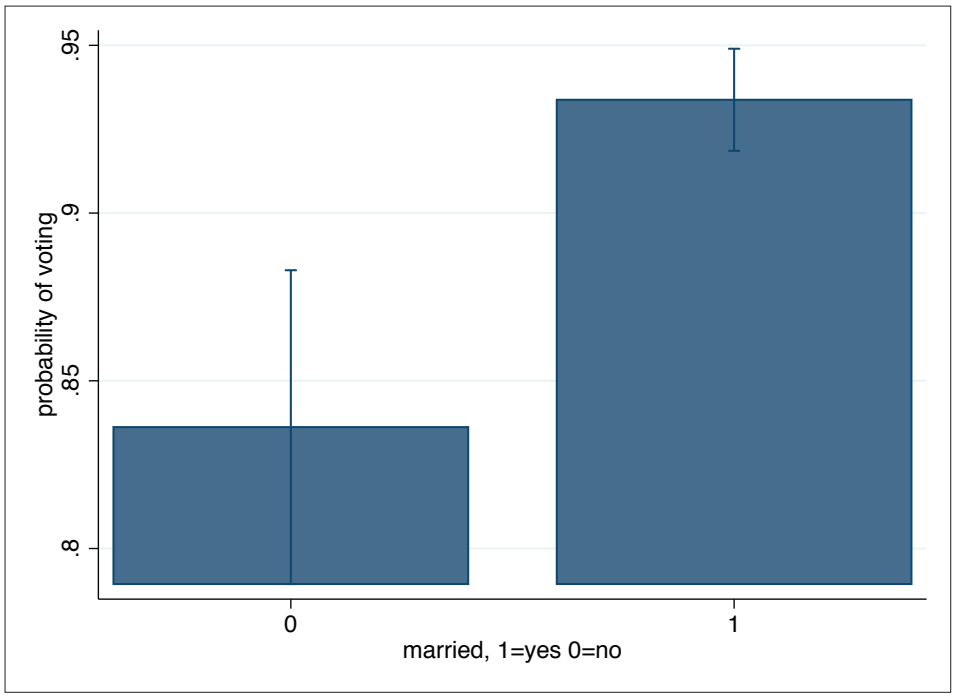
Marital status

Marital status has often been found to have a major influence on political decisions, including electoral participation and political support in the family. Some studies indicate that electoral participation is highest among young adults but decreases with marriage and drops significantly with children in the

family (Wilensky 2002). However, others believe that separated and widowed people are less likely to vote than married and unmarried people as they lack companions to provide motivation for civic participation, or stressful process of ending a marriage (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

As some analysts of voter turnout compare married individuals to everyone else, data categories other than married and not married are combined in the model. The estimated results show that the predicted probability of voting is 0.94 for people who are married and 0.84 otherwise. This implies that married people are more likely to vote than those who are single, divorced or widowed. The international evidence suggests that this is because there is a strong influence of spouses on one another to vote and also support in sharing information related to participation (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Bhutan largely shares the same order of social bonding as other parts of the world in terms of family structure and married people are generally more responsible in their behaviour and actions towards political activities, including electoral participation. Further, people in Bhutan are assumed to take additional ownership and responsibility of governance by way of active engagement in choosing their representatives when there are children in the family.

Figure 5: **Predicted probability of voting and marital status**



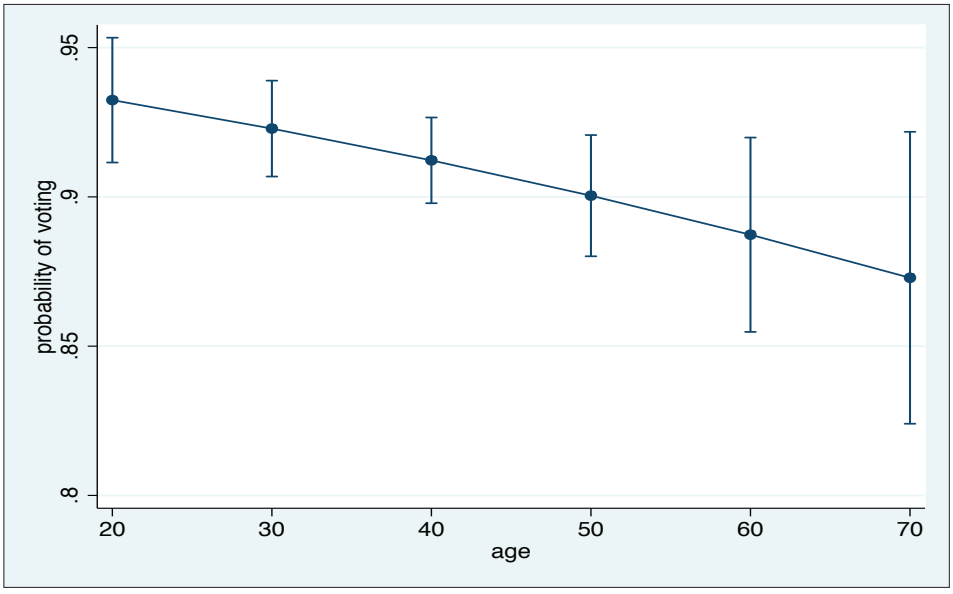
Age

Conventionally, age has not been a strong predictor of voting. The participation rate among different age groups are believed to be stereotypes with younger voters more liberal than older ones and evidence of a generation gap is significant with old voters more likely to vote than the young (Fisher 2008). However, when people reach 75 years and older, they are less likely to vote simply due to waning physical strength, movement and energy level (Strate et al. 1989).

Age, even though it is not a strong predictor of voting, when other variables (income, education, marital status, gender, religion, and tradition) are controlled for, a statistically significant relationship was found between age and electoral participation, with younger groups more likely to participate in voting than their older generation.

It is interesting to note, however, that the bivariate (two variables) relationship between age and voting produces opposite results. This indicates that when other factors are not taken into account, older people are more likely to vote than younger people. This observation is interesting and it can be assumed that their decision to vote is influenced by many variables beside age. Family obligation, social responsibilities, religious commitments are some possible factors that have influenced older people's decision to vote in Bhutan.

Figure 3: **Predicted probability of voting and age groups**



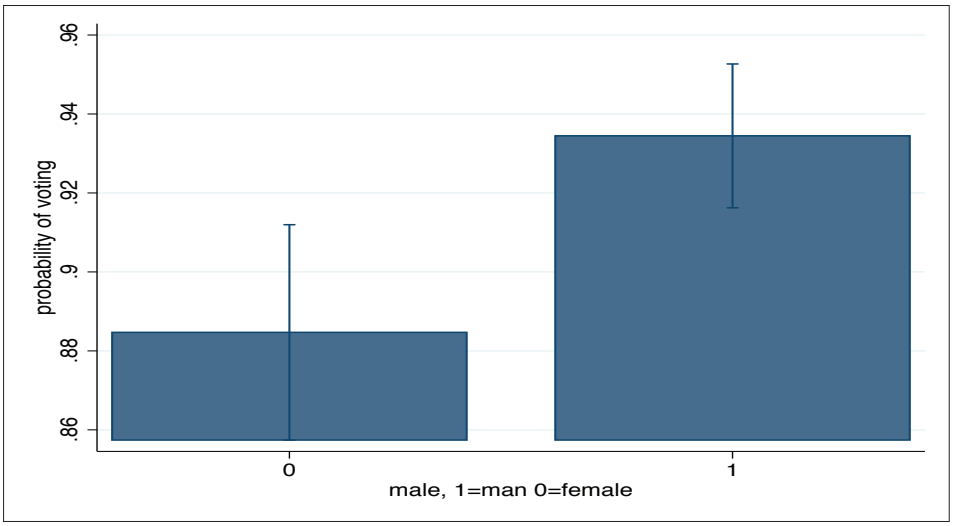
Gender

The International IDEA's data on voter turnout by gender and country shows no clear evidence that either men or women vote more. Data of voter turnout from 1945 to 1972 in Finland shows that the turnout of men is more than women consistently, while Malta recorded a higher number of women participating in parliamentary elections from 1976 to 2003 (International IDEA 2016). This indicates that the relationship between voter participation and gender is historically aligned to specific countries and not clearly on gender voting behavior.

In Bhutan, however, the study indicates that men are more likely to vote than women. The regression (data) analysis suggest that, when more control variables are added to the model, the probability of voting increases for men compared to women which is supported by statistical significance. Several factors could account for these statistical findings:

1. Men are more mobile and accessible to polling stations in rugged geographical conditions.
2. The head of the family is always the man unless there is no male member in the family. Most of the time, family decisions are taken by the head of the family.
3. Historically, men are politically active and represent in the public offices.

Figure 4: **Predicted probability of voting and gender**



Religion and Tradition

There has been no correlation established between religion and tradition and voting in Bhutan. Due to strong beliefs and devotion to religious beliefs and practices among the Bhutanese people, it might sound surprising not to have any relation between the religious beliefs and the decision to vote. One potential reason for the lack of correlation between these variables is due to the Constitutional requirement of clear separation of religious institutions and political institutions. According to a provision in the Electoral Act, all persons who are registered as religious personalities are considered above politics and they are not required to participate in the electoral process. The law also does not allow the formation of political parties based on religion, race, caste, or region.

Campaign and Electoral Information

Political campaigns and electoral information are an integral part of a democratic process. Based on the levels of technological development and access to different forms of information and communication channels, political parties work with different strategies to win and garner votes within the rules of the game. Under the direction and control of the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB), political parties in Bhutan can conduct election campaigns in the form of common forums, television debates, campaign rallies, door-to-door campaigns, and social media interactions. To ensure a level playing field amongst the political parties, the ECB regulates and monitors the use of uniform campaign materials–banners, posters, pamphlets, and placards for distribution—sponsored by the State as well as the parties themselves. All campaign platforms benefit people in getting timely information and knowledge. The findings of this study, in which information was measured with common forums as the base category, show that people are less likely to vote if they primarily participate in the campaign through other forms of campaigns relative to common forums. In other words, the statistical evidence indicates that people are more likely to vote if they have attended common forums.

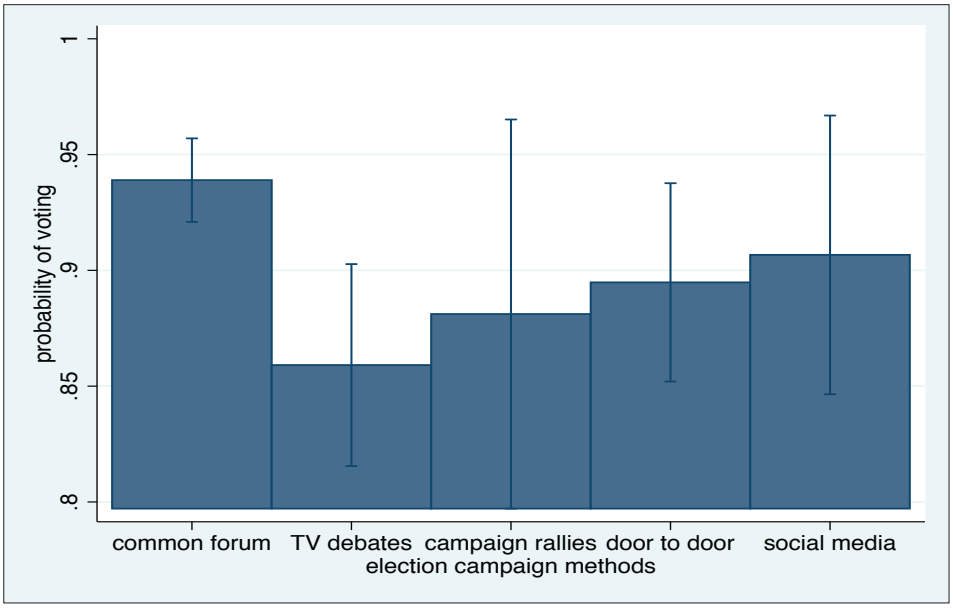
The simple assumption of this outcome can be attributed to access and coverage of the campaign information. Common forums are organised and coordinated by the ECB in all the communities and villages for all political parties and the political parties are required to address the forums mandatorily. The idea of all political parties addressing the common forums at the same time moderated by the electoral authority ensures that there is a level playing field for parties to communicate their campaign promises

without necessarily resorting to negative campaigning. As voters can attend electoral campaigns for all parties together in the common forums, this has become a popular campaign strategy.

While other forms of campaigns are practiced by political parties, these have received mixed reactions to their approach and effectiveness. Door-to-door campaigns for example have been criticised for being susceptible to corruption and bribery. The post election review reports indicate that voters do not accrue any additional benefit from door-to-door campaigns, rather they create social discord and community divisions, and the reports suggest that be done away with.

Even though the television debates and the information dissemination undertaken through social media are very effective communication channels, only a handful of voters have access to such modern technology driven information dissemination.

Figure 6: **Probability of voting influenced by electoral campaign strategies**



Other Control Variables

Party discord has been included as one variable in the model, as there have been many instances of party coordinators and workers influencing and creating communal discords during elections.

However, the results indicate that there is no correlation between individuals' concerns with party discords and electoral participation.

The residence of the voter was included in the model to see if either urban or rural people are more likely to vote. The regression results show that there is no difference between the voters residing in urban and rural in terms of electoral participation.

Electoral promises are an important party policy that translates into government policies for the party in power. After the first elections, there were instances where the political parties and their candidates made campaign promises which were beyond their mandates, and this has been a concern for the electorates. The positive relationship between voting and the concern of unrealistic promises being made at elections suggests that the problem with unrealistic promises is not one of the main reasons people are not voting. However, the finding does also suggest that unrealistic promises are a concern for people who are choosing to take part in the electoral process.

Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of socio-economic status on the electoral participation. Using survey data, the analysis involved a logistic regression (*Logistic regression is a statistical method for analyzing a dataset in which there are one or more independent variables that determine an outcome*). The results indicate that controlling for other control variables that are relevant to the decision of individual voters in Bhutan, *people with higher incomes are more likely to vote than people with less income.* This finding of lower turnout of poor people in Bhutan can be associated with the cost of voting and access to information on elections. Further, this study indicates that *men are more likely to vote than women, the married people are more likely to vote than the single, divorced or widowed people, and the common forums appear to be the method of electoral campaigning most likely to motivate people to vote.*

Contrary to previous studies of positive correlation between education and electoral participation, *education in Bhutan is found to have a negative correlation to electoral participation, which indicates that with an increase in the level of education, people are less likely to vote.* This finding in Bhutan, however, can be related to the provisions in electoral laws that stipulate the system of voter registration, which is based on the civil registry. This finding also can be attributed to constitutional provisions of apolitical mandate of public servants that distance educated public servants from politics and political activities.

The impact of socio-economic status on electoral participation could have substantial consequences for the Bhutanese political institutions and democracy. The findings from this study suggest that there is an opportunity for policy reform to design programme that could help in reducing the impact of socio-economic status in the electoral participation in Bhutan.

First, poor people are less likely to vote because of the cost associated with voting and due to lack of information on the importance of voting and access to campaign information. This problem can be addressed by making electoral education and voter information more accessible to poor people and placing polling stations near to them. Special programmes can be designed targeting poor people and remote voters to encourage their future participation.

Second, voters frequently attend common forums and extending this coordinated campaign method can help voters access information on political parties and candidates. The common forums may be taken beyond the present locations of gewogs (local government) and thromdes (municipal). The common forums at every chiwogs (group of communities) level might encourage people to access information and motivate to vote in the future elections.

Third, there is a large difference between voter participation of married people with that of others—single, widowed, and divorced. To understand this demographic representation of voting population, a separate study on this might help in targeting these groups.

Fourth, education being negatively correlated to electoral participation may have substantial consequences for the sustainability of electoral democracy in Bhutan. Additional effort must be made both by the election authority and the political parties to engage educated voters to participate in future elections.

Fifth, exploring alternatives for people who live in the cities by allowing them to vote in the cities might help increase the educated voters to vote in future elections.

This study is the first of a kind in Bhutan to investigate the affect of socio-economic status on electoral participation and the paper hopes to facilitate policy debates and discussions aimed at increasing participation in Bhutan's future elections.

This survey data is drawn from the national population, surveyed based on random sampling, with a sample size of 1,546. While the data is weighted

to generate estimates that are nationally representative, it is not without limitations. The voter turnout from the survey data indicates 90 percent while the actual voter turnout was only 66.13 percent (2013) which could be due to social desirability bias (*response bias like over reporting or under reporting of the facts*) in the survey data. This study then leaves ample opportunity for future researches, covering broad areas of democracy and elections in Bhutan.

For references visit www.drukjournal.bt

National Interest Versus Party Interest: What Former Chimis Think of Parliamentary Discussions

Tashi Dema

Norzang, after returning from Thimphu, tells the farmers in his remote village that members of ruling and opposition parties "argue like a married couple" during the live broadcast of National Assembly (NA) sessions.

The villagers, who do not have television to watch the deliberations and news, say that since the Members of Parliament have university degrees, they should not be arguing with each other, but should be deliberating issues of national interest.

Norzang says he doubts that elected members think of national interest.

This is an excerpt of an episode from a series broadcast on the Bhutan Broadcasting Service every night after the 9 pm news. The significance is that many Bhutanese citizens echo this view when they talk about deliberations in the National Assembly.

A Trashigang resident, Sonam Dorji, 53, who served as the Trashigang town chimi (representative), said that when they were representatives of the people then, they were too timid even to look at officials directly in the eyes.

Although the Parliament of Bhutan comprises the Druk Gyalpo, the National Council, and the National Assembly,[1] people pay more attention to National Assembly deliberations during Parliament sessions. "The MPs, being university graduates, should be more refined and argue with less ego," he said. "They need to respect each other in the Supreme House."

A former chimi, Namgay Phuntsho of Punakha, said that when they were chimis, they represented the people's views by bringing in the agenda from the people, and it was not based on a political party manifesto.

He said that, unlike today, it was not the majority of MPs that decided the National Assembly resolutions, but the views of the general public.

1 http://www.nationalcouncil.bt/assets/uploads/docs/acts/2017/Constitution_of_Bhutan_2008.pdf

The 59-year-old man, who served as chimi for 18 years, said there was no voting and no show of hands system, which allowed the Speaker to decide on resolutions and laws in line with government policies.

Today, the resolutions are based on the "majority" — the ruling government and the Party in power, since it has more members.

The NA must represent the people of their constituency once they are elected, and not the Party they contested from.

An aspiring MP, Tenzin Lekphel, who contested from the first political party formed in the country (the People's Democratic Party) and later helped formed the Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (popularly known as DNT in 2013), said that most NA resolutions appeared to be based on the ruling government's need to show to people that they could implement their political manifestos.

Citing the example of the thromde (municipality) resolution of 2016[2], he said that he knew some ruling MPs had reservations about the establishment of the dzongkhag (district) and yenlag thromdes (satellite town), but they unanimously voted for their establishment anyway. "If not for the Supreme Court writ[3], Bhutan would have incurred a huge loss in instituting dzongkhag and yenlag thromdes."

Media reports state that the government, while amending the Local Government (LG) Act in 2014, made it mandatory to institute a dzongkhag and yenlag thromde in every dzongkhag. "The previous provisions of criteria specifying the size and number of voters in a demkhong (constituency) were also done away with. The government also pledged to establish a thromde in each dzongkhag. One observer said that the government could not push to fulfil their pledges at the cost of the State, and that, too, in violation of the Constitution," a Kuensel report stated.

Tenzin Lekphel said that the Speaker had a big role to play to ensure that the deliberations and resolutions of the NA are in line with national interest. "The Speaker should be neutral but, in our case, the Speaker is also from the ruling party."

He said that while we seemed to replicate the democratic practices of neighbouring countries, we should be different, as Bhutan is a small country with an intricate society.

2 http://www.kuenselonline.com/15-dzongkhags-cleared-for-thromde-election/
3 http://www.kuenselonline.com/sc-issues-writ-deferring-thromde-elections/

"We need not necessarily imitate the Parliament sessions of neighbouring countries, where the MPs not only argue, but physically assault each other in Parliament."

It is not only people outside the Parliament who feel that the NA deliberations and resolutions should focus on national interest.

A serving MP, who chose to be anonymous, said there were occasions when he contradicted his own principles and convictions.

He said that he was often advised to align with his Party while voicing his concerns in the NA. "There are incidences where your stand can be against the Party's or a Minister's stand." He said that they could choose to be different and speak against the Party, but they would face the consequences of being sidelined. "They call you the black sheep and do not share Party discussions and decisions with you."

A former MP, Lhatu of Trashigang, while declaring his candidature to contest in the National Council (NC) elections, said that the NC was different, as it was based on personal ideologies and not Party orientation.

"When it comes to Parties, it is difficult, as you have to even lie sometimes, which is not always in line with your conscience[4]."

A member of the present ruling government, Bumthang's Chumey-Ura MP Tshewang Jurme, who previously served in the National Council, said that going by the book, it was designed in such a way that the government had the upper hand, so that no budget was stopped, to enable the smooth functioning of the government.

The book also mandates that the deliberations are of national interest and not Party interest. "The National Assembly should function as per the NA rules of procedure where an MP functions as a part of the NA and not as a member of the Party."

He says that is the reason it is called the "Supremacy of the NA", to which every member defers. Tshewang Jurme said that there was a collective functioning of the members, which is why committees were formed, and it functioned on a daily basis. "The stand of a particular member should be as per the stand of the committee, and not as member of the ruling Party or Opposition."

4 http://www.kuenselonline.com/former-dpt-mp-to-contest-for-trashigang-nc/

He said that in reality, however, committee decisions could be shelved, and some members defied the committee's stand.

Such perceptions of Parliamentary deliberations also seem to have caused fear among the people, that there is a "us versus them" syndrome[5] among NA members.

A Thimphu resident, Gyeltshen, 75, said it appeared that some MPs took part in the deliberations just to show solidarity. "There is so much need for members to stop unnecessary bickering and to come together to discuss issues that affect the people and country," he said.

Citing the examples of unemployment and hydropower issues, he said the members had to seek solutions instead of bickering over how the situation was during the time of the past government. "It's time our leaders, instead of dividing themselves along Party lines, resolve the issues."

He said that it could be because our National Assembly members were from two Parties. "Sometimes I wonder if a multi-party system could have avoided such confrontations in Parliament."

A serving MP, who did not want to be named, said while there were no blatant incidents, the "us versus them" syndrome was evident, because some leaders casually remarked that a certain constituency did not deserve the appropriate budget since the MP was from the opposition Party.

"This has been the case since 2008 and nothing has changed," he said.

The MP explained that members were either referred to as PDP or DPT MPs, making it difficult for reconciliation after the elections. "Ideally you should represent your constituency and that is why the Speaker, when referring to MPs, call them by their constituency names," he said. "But when it comes to the stand a member takes it is mostly in line with Party interest and not as a member of the House."

The question is how can we have a better system, with members who represent the people's views more than Party politics?

There are instances where members do not necessarily follow the Party interest to question Ministers and the government on certain issues.

5 http://www.theemotionmachine.com/the-us-vs-them-mentality-how-group-thinking-can-irrationally-divide-us/

The Gasa MP, Pema Drukpa, asked if Ministers could keep their duty Prado, in a question-and-answer session of the NA. While the Finance Minister said they would decide when their term was over the Prime Minister had to retract this answer, and said they would surrender it to the State. While rumours were rife that other members were angry with the MP for asking the question it was an example of a Parliamentary member not being in line with Party members.

The former Chief Justice of Bhutan, Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye, in his book, "The Constitution of Bhutan: Principles and Philosophies", stated that Parliament was a body representing different political opinions in the country wherein all legislative powers were vested.

The book describes Parliament as "a deliberative body where policies and the welfare and development issues of the people and the nation are discussed".

The first National Assembly, held in Punakha in 1953, had 138 members comprising members of the central government, district administration, monk body, and representatives of the people[6]. The members were then called thuemis (elected representatives) or chimis (local government representatives).

Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye said there was a separation of power even during the time of chimis since the elected chimis could oppose the government or executive body.

"The Ministers were nominated by His Majesty The King and elected by Parliament and they played the role of the executive. The NA was legislative and the chimis played the role of an opposition."

The former Chief Justice, in his book, also stated that educated Parliamentarians had the imperative duty to provide the nation with enlightened laws. "Parliament is meant to be a citadel of justice and the embodiment of crystallised wisdom and leadership. The Parliament of Bhutan is the representative of the people of Bhutan, and its members should think of the national good."

He added that Speakers had played a vital role over the last few decades, particularly after the devolution of power by His Majesty The Fourth Druk Gyalpo. "Under the devolution of power, His Majesty had enunciated a unique system of governance, where the Ministers were elected after they were nominated by His Majesty."

6 Gyambo S and Dorji T, *Drukyul Decides*

He said that in a democratic system, the Speaker was always from the ruling party for governance, and not as an opponent. "Opposition and opponents are two different things. To oppose everything the government is doing, there will be a chaotic system where there will be no governance."

Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye said that it was a democratic norm to have the Speaker from a ruling Party to represent and control the majority in Parliament. "Under a functioning democracy the Speaker cannot be from the other Party."

However, once the member is chosen as the Speaker, it is a Parliamentary norm for the Speaker to be impartial and fair.

Some people question why Bhutan did not opt to have a democracy without political Parties. The former Chief Justice said that in such a system, it is the powerful and influential who ruled the others.

"There is no organised platform or organisation to oppose the authoritarian and dictatorship. A Party platform can provide that. As bad as a Party system may be, it is a coherent alternative, and it provides a platform for unity, and not individualism. The Party gives the public a voice."

Without the Party, it is the personality and the standing of a person that prevails, and not ideology and principle. "A person can change his principle and ideology, but where there is an organised Party, they have to stick to the certain principle and ideology on the grounds that the people endorsed them."

On why Bhutan did not opt for a multi-party system, Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye said multi-party sounded nice, because it implied plurality and represented diverse views but, under that principle, certain national interests and security of the nation were sacrificed. "Under the principle of the multi-party system, regionalism, ethnicity, group mentality, and extremism are promoted."

He said that, while drafting the Constitution, it was found that a multi-party system in the region was problematic. There was a time when there were 14 Parties in one government in India, 60 Parties in Nepal, and about 80 Parties in Indonesia. Wherever there were too many Parties governance was also sacrificed. "To Bhutan governance was important and necessary for progress, peace, sovereignty, and stability."

He said people asked why there could not be a three-party system and it was because there was a danger of promoting regionalism. "The third Party will also play an important role in trying to topple and to bully the government.

Two-party is a plurality so that there is security and stability in the country with a strong Opposition."

Conclusion

Our Parliamentarians must set standards and abide by the rules of procedure, and bear in mind the Royal Kasho (Royal Decree) signed by His Majesty The Fourth King on December 9, 2006, which states:

"As I hand over my responsibilities to my son, I repose my full faith and belief in the people of Bhutan to look after the future of our nation, for it is the Bhutanese people who are the true custodians of our tradition and culture, and ultimate guardians of the security, sovereignty, and continued well-being of our country (Kuensel)."

The Bhutanese Politicians

Kesang Dema

It was almost typical in the past for a family in the backwoods of the country to occasionally greet "government people" at their doors.

It was either the agriculture extension officer communicating about the use of fertilisers, or the village health worker conveying health and sanitation tips, or the local representatives summoning villagers to a meeting about an impending road construction nearby.

But a day came when new faces, assuming a mantle totally unheard of, appeared on the doorsteps of the farmers. They claimed to be on a glorious mission of serving the King, country, and people.

The visitors convened numerous meetings where they promised to transform the community and the lives of villagers, almost overnight. The newcomers sought their support. They needed votes.

As the rural folks put it these were the "Party people". That was in 2007 when the democratic process commenced.

Since then, over the two parliamentary elections that Bhutan has had, more individuals have appeared in their hometowns, declaring themselves as candidates for one of the political Parties. They expressed their aspirations to contest elections and sought endorsement.

They were the fresh wave of Bhutanese politicians, churned out of the democratic system that was introduced. The men, and a few women, had come forward to form political Parties, a concept unheard of until then.

Today, as the nation is on the verge of its third parliamentary elections, and as political Parties are going all out to cajole prospective candidates, more politicians are in the making. The mainstream and social media flash announcements of new party candidates almost every second week.

The Start

It all took off with the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) inviting interested Bhutanese citizens to form political parties. The parties were to ensure a broad-based, cross-national membership and support, among other conditions.

A visible response came from the serving chimmis (grassroots representatives), who were representing different parts of the country at the National Assembly then. Having landed there through an election process, it was understandable that the chimmis showed enthusiasm.

That changed when possession of a formal university degree became a requisite for aspiring Parliament members. The disappointed chimmis, who came loaded with local knowledge and wisdom but without formal university education, caused much rumblings in the press.

With its prominence, the bureaucracy was then seen as the most likely source of candidates and serving ministers as party leaders. Two political parties secured registration and went on to contest the first parliamentary elections in March, 2008.

Five years on, in 2013, three new political parties had secured registration. In building up their team of 47 candidates from as many constituencies, more people joined politics. While some of those who fell out of the race in the first elections returned this time, others departed from the political scene for good.

Today, the political cluster is rapidly expanding, with political parties setting out on a vigorous hunt for suitable candidates. While no new political parties have secured registration for now the existing ones, including those outside the Parliament, are fortifying their camps by launching new faces in the political arena.

The Political Composition

As long as one is a citizen of Bhutan, aged between 25 and 65 years, possesses a university degree and has not been convicted of a criminal offence, one can opt to contest in the elections.

These are some of the criteria stated in the electoral law but is that all it takes to join politics?

Candidates for National Council elections, considering its apolitical mandate, need not be affiliated to any political party and so their decisions to run are arrived at without much predicament. So far, individuals from all professional backgrounds have emerged to serve as politicians.

There are teachers, doctors, ministers, bureaucrats, private consultants, judges, lawyers, and soldiers, and those from the corporate sector and non-government organisations.

In terms of education, records show highly qualified candidates have come forward since the first parliamentary elections. When the process started, People's Democratic Party (PDP) had two candidates with doctorates and 21 with Masters degrees. Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) had one with a doctorate and 16 with Masters degrees. Most of the contestants were aged between 41 and 50 years.

Without any political backstory before the democratic process unfolded what made these individuals embrace the undefined path of politics?

Their reasons varied from wanting to try out something new to giving in to the persuasion of colleagues and superiors who were already into politics.

For Tenzin Lekphell, General Secretary of Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa, who started his political career with PDP, it was because of the excitement surrounding the first elections and wanting to be a part of it. "It was much later that I felt the real sense of purpose in being a politician in Bhutan," Tenzin Lekphell said.

Politicians could play a pivotal role in contributing to the democratic process, outlining plans and programmes imperative to nation-building, while aspiring to win elections in order to fulfil them.

For many, such motivations over the years have not really changed but some are driven by specific goals.

One of the newest entrants in politics, former journalist Passang Dorji, who joined DPT in February, said he saw it as a calling that challenged his beliefs and courage.

"If we want our democracy to succeed, we cannot make politics a convenient source of employment and a profession to retire to," he said. "I intend to motivate mid-level professionals to take up the responsibility and make our democracy work."

As a former journalist Passang Dorji also aspires to be of some use in promoting the practice of vibrant journalism which is almost fading at the moment, to contribute towards consolidating the young democracy.

For others, it was about writing a political script that is special to Bhutan, rather than perpetuating political trends borrowed from elsewhere.

Less than a year into politics Bhutan Kuen-nyam Party president, Dasho Neten Zangmo, said she was driven by the conviction to speak a different political language, a definition unique to Bhutan.

The practice so far, she said, had resulted in division in the family, disharmony in the community, and fears instilled in people, consequences too costly for a small country.

Parliament representative Tshewang Jurme, who entered party politics after serving as a member of the National Council in the first five years, said it was an opportunity to serve his constituents hands-on, rather than from the earlier mandate of overall policy review and legislation.

"Not many people know the difference though," the PDP candidate said.

What it Entails?

From the day you decide to join politics you are a public figure. You need to articulate well and it is even better if you can do so in the national language. You are closely followed. With every new contact you build an old acquaintance exits. Some do not want to be seen together. Others assume every word that you speak is laden with an agenda for personal gain.

That is on the outside. On a personal front you have, with much apprehension, left a secure job. Some family members rebuke you for making a decision seen as impractical and irresponsible. What if you lose the elections?

Those who have tested the political waters said it takes a whole lot of nerve and a great deal of planning to be a politician in Bhutan. It is a full-time job that solicits commitment and energy.

PDP's Parliamentary representative, Tshewang Jurme, said that once into politics, it only made sense for politicians to play the game well. "In pursuit of the noble visions of our Kings politicians should be dynamic, open to criticism, and ensure they don't take voters for granted," he said. He also noted that those pursuing politics should ensure financial security for the family and put in place a "plan B" to fall back on.

Those failing to secure a win in past elections had to restart their career by joining private firms and non-government organisations. With a few exceptions, that was the end of their political stint.

Dasho Neten Zangmo admitted that there were practical aspects to it and that there was no system or infrastructure to support one for an interim period. That was one of the biggest impediments while dealing with prospective candidates.

It was common, while approaching a likely candidate, for them to claim to be anything but "cut out" for politics.

Dasho Neten Zangmo said if you have to ape politics prevalent the world over, one might not be cut out to fit the bill. "However, if you are convinced that Bhutanese have to define their own path any businessman or a person walking on the street is suitable for politics," she said. She added that in order to win, everyone preferred to go by the definition of a conventional politician, and those trying to do it differently are perceived to be too naïve and stupid.

DNT's Tenzin Lekphell, who is well-versed in hunting for candidates since the last elections in order to put his party together, said consideration of politics varied from one person to another with most experiencing the dilemma of exiting a comfortable life to deal with repercussions in the public domain.

However, with all the events that unfolded over the years, Tshewang Jurme said politicians have some serious image-building to do.

"For whatever reason politicians are viewed with much scepticism," he said.

Tenzin Lekphell also said politicians were viewed as "greedy" people in pursuit of perks and status. In putting the house in order, discussions on entitlements — stamping a logo on the cars of Parliament members for example — sent out the wrong messages.

"There could be those who are pursuing self-interest but how about those who are genuine?"

Reiterating the responsibility politicians shoulder, Tenzin Lekphell said divisions that politics create, and mistakes politicians make, could have inconceivable implications on a small country like Bhutan.

Looking Ahead

In December last year, a conference — first of its kind in the country — brought together members and representatives of all five political parties to review the journey thus far. In the discussions they committed themselves to place national interests before that of their parties. They pledged to act as "Bhutanese first".

Perhaps the determination to translate that spirit into action should be the biggest quality in a Bhutanese politician.

As the key players of a democratic process politicians should conduct themselves responsibly, work with humility, and refrain from personal attacks and corrupt practices. Those at the helm of political parties should strive to enroll candidates that exude the right values and attitudes and base their campaigns on strategies that place the spirit of the Bhutanese first.

Irrespective of what transpired in the first decade of our democratic process, the ideal way forward is to embrace political pursuits beyond elections and beyond 2018.

The onus falls on the politicians to redefine a democracy that matches the aspirations of our Kings and the expectations of the people.

Youth and Politics in an Evolving Democracy

Siok Sian Pek-Dorji

The Implications of Politicising Youth

Come November this year, an estimated 432,000 Bhutanese citizens are eligible to go to the polls to elect the party which will form the government for the next five years. It is difficult to gauge how many will actually do so but the question on our minds is, who will the Bhutanese people vote for… and why? The underlying question is, what have we learned over the past 10 years of democratic governance?

A parliamentary democracy works when people become empowered and engaged citizens and thus vote responsibly. To vote responsibly, people need to understand how a democratic government functions and, to understand the functioning of government, they must be educated in governance. In an ideal situation this would be done through education in political science and civics and through exposure to open and healthy political discourse and debate.

This paper focuses on young Bhutanese citizens and voters including the voters of the future. What are they learning about democracy and government? What are we teaching them? How have two general elections affected them? What needs to be done?

About 56 percent of the population are under the age of 25 years, and youth make up about a third of our electorate[1]. How will this significant group of voters choose their leaders if they do not understand the system of government and politics that lies at the heart of democracy? There's little that prepares our youth to be good citizens as we tend to focus on the mechanics of elections or the actions of parliament. There is no formal education on politics in our schools and even colleges and there is very little open discussion.

Are we becoming more caught up with the rituals of democracy rather than the ideals and values of democracy? How is Bhutan's younger generation learning about democracy today and how can we create a more realistic approach to enable youth to explore and understand democracy? Are we building adequate citizenship skills among young people?

1 The 2005 national census show that there are about 147,36 youth between the ages of 17-27 in 2018. The voting age is 18. If we take the expected voter registration to be about 432,000 (ECB estimates), youth wil make up close to 34% of the cohort of people who can vote in the country.

Our education system has not caught up with the changes required. Civics texts -- drafted before democracy was introduced -- are outdated descriptions of institutions and their processes. Politics has not been included in the school curriculum. Social Studies[2], taught as a subject in schools, is different from Civics Education which, according to the United States Centre for Civics Education, "is education in self-government. Democratic self-government means that citizens are actively involved in their own governance; they do not just passively accept the dictums of others or acquiesce to the demands of others". Civics education needs to enable citizens to widen their understanding of the ideals of democracy and understand the values and principles of democracy after discussion and reasoning. It can also enable youth to become more engaged citizens in society.

At the tertiary level there are two colleges that teach political science with a focus on international politics and discussions that are not necessarily related to Bhutan. "Many people are not used to discussing politics in Bhutan," says Kencho Pelzom, a political science lecturer. "While students become more aware by the time they get to their final college year, they don't see politics as something that they can care about and not just as a career option."

Outside the academia, discussion on democracy and politics in the social media tend to be filled with characteristic banter and unverified opinions that do not help advance understanding of what's happening in the country. Social media discussions tend to become platforms for people to launch attacks on political ideas[3], as is demonstrated the world over. It is no different in Bhutan. Online content moderation can only treat the symptoms of online abuse. Education is the long-term and only recourse to address the roots of toxic content in the media, including social media which is the main source of information for Bhutanese youth.

The Sensitivity of Politics

In Bhutan many aspects of politics are considered "sensitive" issues. Political processes are strictly guided by rules and regulations we've put in to "protect" ourselves in the early years of democratisation and herein lies the challenge to the democratisation of governance.

The ECB's call for non-partisanship that guides schools, colleges, and civil society organisations is a deterrent to discussions in educational institutions.

2 Social studies offered from class four upwards focuses on Bhutan's history and geography with an emphasis on culture.

3 Amnesty International's latest annual report on the state of the world's human rights documents a global rise in what it describes as "state sponsored hate", and chronicles the variety of ways governments and leaders are increasingly supporting hateful rhetoric and policies that seek to demonise marginalised groups, alluding to what is happening now in the United States of America.

Civil servants are required to be apolitical, a norm for many public servants in governments across the world. The only difference is that in a country of less than 750,000 people of whom the best educated are civil servants, this severely limits public discussion on democracy among Bhutan's educated populace.

While these intentions may be good, democracy is not a "sensitive" issue. The Election Commision of Bhutan's advisory to limit public activities in the periods before elections is another example of this safeguard. While well-intended, people have misunderstood these provisions as setting limits to open discussion on politics resulting in a closed society not conducive to exploring or learning about democracy.

In 2013, a year of elections, a high school in Chukha decided to cancel invitations to candidates for the National Council who are not affiliated to political parties to speak to their students in the belief that they would be considered partisan. A noteworthy event, however, was an open forum held at the Royal Thimphu College in the same year where presidents of the five political parties took to the stage to speak to a full auditorium of youth.

Academics teaching in colleges have observed self-censorship amongst Bhutanese youth who are generally not able to recognise the affinity between being patriotic and being constructively critical which is healthy in a democracy. "We put that pressure on youth. Right from the beginning, our schools try to teach them what they can talk about and what they cannot," says an academic. We are a populace that shies away from questioning authority and hierarchy even if it's to seek clarification. Hence the tendency to turn to anonymous means of "only criticising" and holding the government accountable that takes a malicious in tone instead of a more healthy open system of feedback.

If we are to take ownership of changes in the system of governance there needs to be more space for open discussion on politics. It's as if a well-meaning parent is "schooling" us to be more democratic through deliberate instructions. And instead of the real crux and values of democracy, we pay attention to the rites, and rituals of parliamentary form and language.

Bringing It Out in the Open

We have created an atmosphere where it is misunderstood that only candidates for elections can discuss politics in public. All political discussions are confined to homes or whispered in the cubicles of the bureaucracy. The muted discussions are replaced by the state broadcaster beaming faces and sound–bites of would-be candidates and appearing as election news in newspapers that are facing a declining readership.

In the discussions on youth and politics, bureaucrats and lawmakers, media and civil society, and the average citizens have openly expressed fears of "politicising" youth. In this context the term "politicise" implies that, rather than educating youth to understand democracy and governance, we are labelling everything, even daily activities, as being politically motivated. We may be teaching youth the rituals of behaving like politicians. Hence the hesitation to "politicise" youth.

To understand the term "politicise" take the extreme example of a group of friends who went to see the Black-Necked Crane in Phobjikha. One asked the others if the group may be dubbed Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) supporters by going to see the cranes. This is politicising the Black-Necked Crane.

In the realm of party politics there is a tradition of establishing "youth wings" of political parties for the wrong reasons. If we take examples across South Asia, political parties recruit university students to agitate and even close down their universities by calling strikes based on party interests. Youth behave like politicians instead of questioning the vision and ideologies of parties to find out what they stand for, to understand political promises and intentions. Political parties in Bhutan are deterred by electoral legislation from having youth wings. Parties have made scattered attempts in the past two elections to reach out to youth but they were largely focussing on youth issues and youth as voters to get their votes.

Introducing Politics to Youth

Efforts to introduce political processes to the younger generation include the Bhutan Children's Parliament (BCP) and democracy clubs in educational institutions.

There are 205 democracy clubs and about 7,190 student members in schools across Bhutan. The clubs focus on the process of elections and some MPs have expressed concern about them becoming politicised organisations in schools in the future.

Students elect members to a Bhutan Children's Parliament formed in 2015 for members ranging from the ages of 13 to 24. The BCP meets annually in a parliament hall at the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) and makes recommendations described as "resolutions" on various issues.

The legitimacy of the Bhutan Children's Parliament was questioned in parliament in 2017. "It's important to advocate and educate our children on democracy and it's all the better if our children understand this at an early age," said the then National Council chairperson, Dasho Dr Sonam Kinga when

discussing the BCP in Parliament. "However, the risk is that our children and education system could be politicised."

National Council (NC) member Dasho Tashi Wangyal pointed out that with more political parties coming up, it's a matter of time when schools and colleges will have student political bodies and recommended that the house reject a budget for the BCP.

NC members acknowledged that educating and raising awareness on democracy and the political system among youth was crucial. But both NC and opposition party members cautioned against the BCP for it's excessive implementation costs and for the risks it poses on youth. Almost a quarter of the participants are above 21 years.

The intention to build leadership skills and enable youth voice to emerge is laudable but has the BCP, in trying to emulate parliament, overstepped its educational function and begun to behave like a real life parliament? BCP role models the functions of Parliament and observers have expressed discomfort in watching children act out the rituals of parliament. Many also questioned the validity of resolutions proposed by the BCP. Following the Parliament's request – reviewers from various organisations[4] invited to the education ministry in October 2017 suggested that the age group for BCP be revised. Current members are aged from 13-24, too wide a gap and the younger children are subject to the influence of teachers or the older youth. Having a smaller age gap would promote more active discussions.

The BCP's "constitution" encourages students to learn about the roles and responsibility of citizens in nation-building and in sustaining democracy besides providing a platform for democracy clubs to come together. The review recommended that the BCP be decentralised to the district level so more students can participate in the educational exercise rather than a centralised national "sitting" with the high costs of bringing in teachers and students to the capital for their parliament sitting.

The review also recommended that the BCP stop sharing the proceedings of its sittings with higher authorities so that the sessions become less formal and less prone to be scripted by teachers or by older youth. This will enable the youth to have freer discussions and not be afraid of making "mistakes" nor of having to make concrete recommendations for government. The Education Minister announced in Parliament in January 2018 that the BCP will continue but that its "resolutions" are not binding even if they are shared with government. It is unclear how the BCP will be revised at the time of writing this article.

4 The review team included representation from government, CSOs and the ECB.

Back to Society

The process of democratic change and elections is developing in a system that's engineered to avoid any possibility of party "influence", and to enable people to vote without "fear or favour". Perhaps it's time to think of a middle path option and to free up some space for the younger generation to think about why they vote for a particular candidate in the context of governance, and not just because of family connections or personalities, among others.

Those in governance should support activities that enable citizens to learn to become more engaged, not just through instruction and directives, but through research and exploration. Emphasis can be placed on teaching and showing youth how to take on the responsibilities of becoming more engaged in our own society and, eventually, the nation.

How can we make the population, the voters, and the youth think about the system within which we live, think about the people whom they want to elect, and ask them to take positions on issues to improve the lives of the people? Have they considered the political parties' views on gender, on hydropower, on employment, on our development plans, and our education system amongst the many other national concerns?

We have the opportunity and duty to open up space for politics to become a daily topic and focus of discussion. There are also many meaningful opportunities for the average person to become more connected with the system of governance be it at the local level, thromde level, or national discussions. Citizen action such as volunteerism, lending support to community needs, sitting on committees, helping to fund raise for local needs and giving constructive feedback to the authorities are all worthy examples of being active citizens.

Dilemma of a Small Society

Our youth could first learn about the functioning of government. What is good governance and how does good governance create and strengthen a sovereign country where the well-being of people is a priority?

While wanting our youth to learn about democracy, we're also being protective and paternalistic, making youth hesitate to discuss politics openly. Political candidates talk about how their own friends and contacts become uncomfortable around them once they join a political party. With the social discomfort in associating with political parties and candidates, how will we convince youth that democracy is a worthy and important process? We see families and friends

who, in an effort to keep the peace, no longer openly discuss politics if they suspect the other side is supporting another political party. The coalition of political parties through the Bhutan Democracy Dialogue has recognised a need to maintain "harmony" in our democracy and has drafted a voluntary pledge for parties to avoid " influencing voters based on regionalisation and religion, and refrain from any act of dividing the society" amongst other pledges[5].

Democracy is about openness. It is important to address this contradiction in the years to come. It will not be done overnight, nor can it be resolved through rules and legislation alone. Our decision-makers have to accept that we cannot have democracy without politics, and create opportunities for open discussion and learning through the home, the school, media, and the public and civil domain. Democracy is also about values and the daily action and decisions we make that contribute to the success of a democratic system. Democracy requires us to make "wise" decisions, to choose our own leaders and become more engaged with our own society. This requires informed and responsible participation in various aspects of community life by competent citizens who are committed to the fundamental values of democracy.

Bhutan can make more effort to promote informed, responsible participation in areas of governance related to society and community, thus enabling citizens to learn to be more participatory, starting from the home, in school, and in the neighbourhood. Encouraging volunteerism is a step towards more civic engagement. We can also do more to get young people involved in their own communities and in shaping their own rules in schools for example.

Civics education should be made central to the education system. It cannot be taught or learnt through extra curricular activities alone. Media and democracy clubs and the BCP, while laudable, makes the lessons of democracy available only to a small cohort of students.

In a year of elections, youth are expected to vote responsibly and many who come to the polls will have to think about our society, the political parties, or even candidates, and what implications the elections will have on Bhutan's long-term sovereignty. We cannot relegate this learning process to media coverage alone.

It is time to put "politics and democracy" into our daily vocabulary and daily discussion. Just like economics, culture, society, spirituality – politics and democracy is about life. And it's time our youth learn to think and talk about these issues. It's not just about how we vote, but why we vote.

5 Pledges by political parties shared after the Bhutan democracy Dialogue's All Party Conference 2017.

Bhutanese Women in Politics: Myths and Realities

Phuntshok Chhoden, Kunzang Lhamu

Policy and Legal Framework (At National and International Level)

Bhutan has given due importance to increasing women's participation in development activities, elected offices and decision-making positions. A review of the five-year plans indicate that, while a gender-neutral position had been maintained by the Government in its policies, plans and programmes, it slowly evolved from a Women in Development approach in the 1980s to a gendered approach by the 10th Five-Year Plan (2008-2013).

Key legal and policy frameworks have been adopted to ensure women's full and equal participation in the political, civil, economic, social, and cultural life. A Royal Decree was issued in 1998 that stressed the importance of women's representation in the National Assembly. The 2008 Constitution under Article 7 (15) states that: "All persons are equal before the law and are entitled to equal and effective protection of the law and shall not be discriminated against on the grounds of race, sex, language, religion, politics or other status."

The National Plan of Action for Gender (NPAG) which was implemented in the 10th Five-Year Plan, reinforced the promotion of women's participation in politics, and identified interventions and targets for enhancing women's participation in politics.

The 11th Five-Year Plan (2013-2018) moved one step further by establishing "Gender Friendly Environment for Women's Participation" as one of the 16 National Key Result Areas, with "Draft legislation to ensure quotas for women in elected offices, including the Parliament and local government bodies" as one of the key performance indicators.

The 12th Five-Year Plan, which will be launched in 2018, has "Gender Equality and Women and Girls Empowered" as a National Key Result Area with key performance indicators and targets that will measure women's representation in Parliament and local government.

The National Plan of Action to Promote Gender Equality in Elected Office (NPAPGEEO) was also developed in 2015, and includes actions to enhance women's participation through awareness and capacity building, as well as propositions to have temporary special measures in place.

Women's rights to equal political and public participation, and the broader principle of gender equality, form a critical component in several declarations, conventions and other international norms. The Beijing Platform for Action 1995 put forward the "positive action" agenda, providing a crucial link between democracy and participation of women:

> "Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning." (Art. 183).

Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) & Article 25 of the International Covenant of Civil & Political Rights (1966) underscore not only the right to vote but to be elected through free & fair elections.

The Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952) calls upon states to ensure that women are eligible for election, at par with men, without any discrimination.

Article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), explicitly states the responsibility of "state parties to eliminate all discrimination against women in being eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies".

Target 5.5, under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), strives to "ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in politics, economy, and public life". A deadline of 13 years is put forth to achieve 50-50 by 2030, that is, to ensure women's full, equal, and effective participation. It is not enough that women are present in governance; they must also be empowered to be effective and hold leadership positions.

Bhutan is currently midway through implementing the 11th Five-Year Plan, which includes gender equality as a key element for strengthening governance. Although Bhutan appointed the first female Minister after the second parliamentary elections in 2013, the number of elected female representatives in Parliament and in local government has decreased, despite strong commitment and political will.

"Success without democracy is improbable; democracy without women is impossible." ~Madeleine K. Albright

Myth vs Reality of Women's Political Participation in Bhutan

The myth of "equality" and the "invisible" reality?

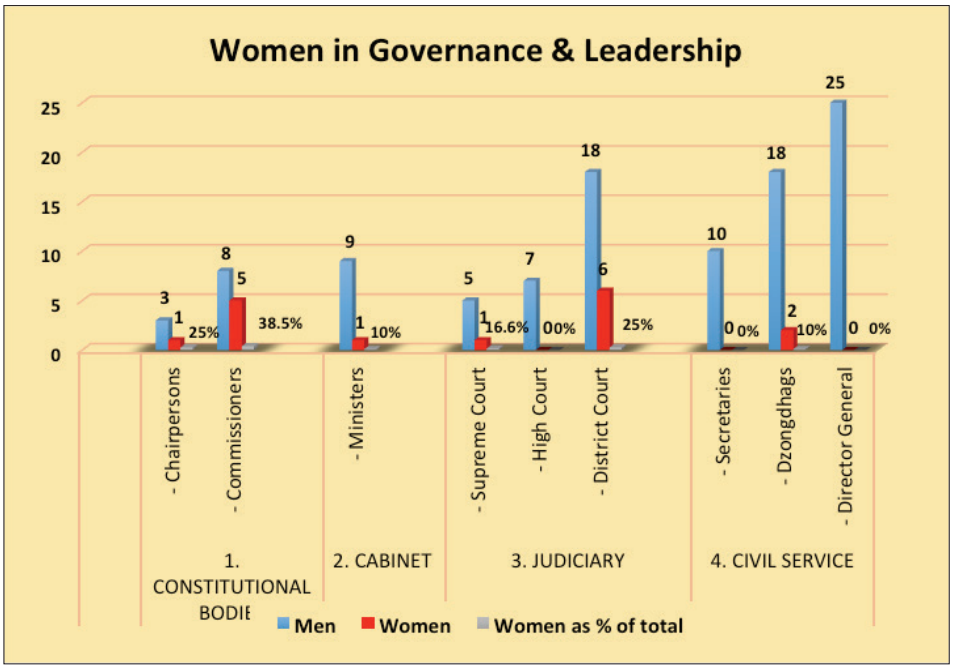
In the land of Gross National Happiness (GNH), a majority of the population is female, and matrilineal customs dominate in many communities. Women inherit family assets and pass them down from mother to daughter. Women are said to be "in charge" and gender relations are highly (and genuinely so) egalitarian. Why, then, are there only four elected women MPs in the 2nd democratically elected Parliament of Bhutan (2013-18)?

Why are there only 8.5 percent of seats in the National Assembly representing women, who comprise 51 percent of the population? Why do the other 49 percent of the population need 91.5 percent of seats to represent them?

To add salt to the wound, all 20 dzongkhags in the National Council (NC) Elections of 2013 elected only men, except for His Majesty The King's benevolent appointment of two women as Eminent Members. The National Council is the House of Review of Laws and Policies. The people of the constituencies of the five women candidates standing for the NC considered them not capable enough to serve. Three of them were re-contesting, as were several male colleagues. Such is the level of confidence in women.

The situation is similar in the 205 Local Governments, with two women gups (head of gewog) struggling to stand tall to be "seen" alongside 203 male gups, Women's voices can barely be "heard". This is a highly unbalanced scenario.

The myth and reality are not in sync, more so when examining this aspect of women in governance, leadership and politics.



Source: BNEW 2017

How do we explain that when Bhutan projects a progressive image of a happy, balanced and harmonious society, where women are empowered and enjoy full equality with men, where women are respected and daughters "favoured"? In reality, women are "invisible" and hence "voiceless" in the prestigious halls of Parliament and the highest policy-making bodies.

Why is the reality on the ground full of gender stereotypical values, norms, attitudes and mindset that covertly and overtly stand in women's way when they reach out for leadership positions in every sphere, in contrast to the myths of a supportive society?

Why do women lack confidence to step out and stand up? Why are women not trusted to lead in the public sphere, even though she can be fully trusted to run and manage the home front? Why are women constantly discouraged from stepping out into the public sphere, which is kept as a space for men only?

The seemingly convincing arguments of the 1970s to 90s — when girls were loved, favoured and kept at home (and hence at a disadvantage today) — no longer hold much water. The narrative has changed and so have women.

Society must recognise this and be more accepting of women in the public and leadership spheres. We should not expect women to stay home, playing expected gender roles that ask of them to be docile, unambitious, uncreative and hence suppressing (and wasting) all their potential, intelligence and wisdom.

Are We a Matrilineal Society Doomed by Patriarchal Norms?

Today, owing to the mismatch of myth and reality, the situation of Bhutanese women is not starkly different from elsewhere. In the not too distant past, Bhutanese women by custom were always at the helm of things and strongly positioned in the family, community, and society. We were definitely not without traces of patriarchal norms and values, but there were other forces that kept it in balance, resulting in the gender-egalitarian relations between men and women in, which we continue to take pride.

With the passage of time, and with "development", "progress" and "modernisation", we seem to be (unknowingly and unquestioningly) in the race to become more and more like the rest around us. Patriarchal values and norms have started to become more prominent even in a matrilineal society like ours. Most of us, including women, believe that leadership roles belong to men, and a woman is best at home. These beliefs are universal, but is it not true that Bhutan is different and unique? Is it possible that Bhutan could again become different and move back to its roots of a Buddhist society which believes in leadership of women and female wisdom?

The first democratically elected Parliament of Bhutan (2008-13) had eight elected women (four in the NA and four in the NC).

Combined with two women appointed by His Majesty The King in the NC, women's representation for the period stood at 13.88 percent. Ten women versus 62 men! This could be compared with the global average of women in Parliament of around 22 percent.

But the number of elected women was halved in the second parliamentary election in 2013, to four women MPs in the Parliament. No woman was elected to the NC, save for the two women Eminent Members appointed by His Majesty The King, whereas the NA maintained the same number of four women MPs. So, today four plus two women MPs represent nearly 51 percent of the population in the Parliament of Bhutan. Is this adequate? Is this good enough? Is this a desirable trend and element in the young Bhutanese democracy that must be nurtured, or "nipped in the bud"?

Some countries, like Denmark, took 100 years to achieve close to 40 percent representation of women in Parliament. Do we want to wait for 100 years too? Should and could Bhutan achieve more at a faster pace than Denmark? Are we capable of doing better in keeping with our own values and principles, guided by the GNH philosophy of development, which conveys a different message altogether, of a Bhutan where women are empowered, "in control", and enjoying equal rights and freedom with men.

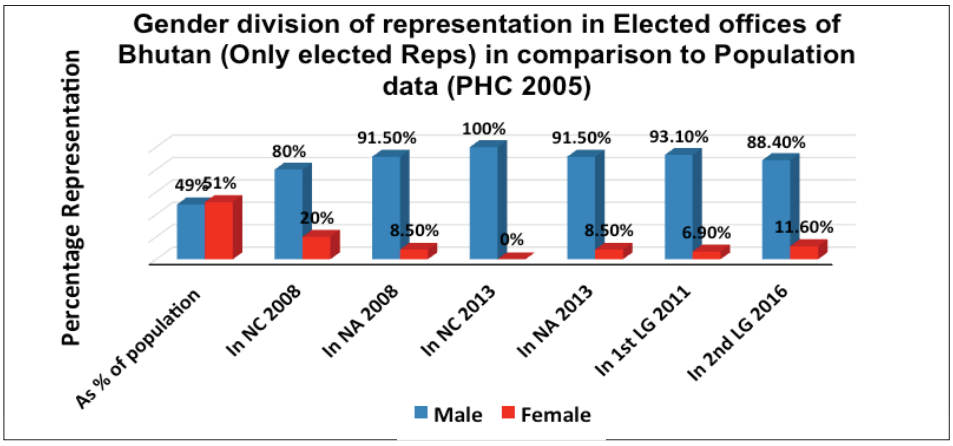
Secretary General of the IPU, Martin Chungong, says that "Parliaments are crucial to ensuring women are among the world's most high-profile leaders and to strengthening the policies and legislation needed to meet the goal of gender equality and women's full and equal participation at all levels by 2030". He adds that "it is time for more ambitious measures to take women's participation and political voice to the next level. A great deal has been achieved in recent years, but more needs to be done to effectively embody gender equality, and deliver it".

Political Participation of Women in Bhutan

Why stress on women's political participation?

Disproportionate representation in decision-making translates into under-representation of issues, or one-sided "shows".

Simple math shows that four women MPs are representing 357,000 Bhutanese citizens who are female, and 63 men represent the remaining 343,000 citizens who are male. This is nothing short of under-representation of women in the Parliament of Bhutan, as shown below:



Source: BNEW

When 50-51 percent of the population are not represented proportionately in decision-making, how can laws, policies, budgets, and development as a result be as balanced, holistic, comprehensive and inclusive as we desire or claim? When women are not "seen" in the corridors of power and leadership, how can they grow to their full potential? How can women learn to lead? How can society be convinced about their ability to lead? In the absence of women's voices, how can the feminine side of concerns, issues, and needs in development be fully addressed?

Unseen is Unheard

In governance and politics, women's participation is more than a matter of "political correctness", fairness, or equality. Gender balance in decision-making has a direct impact on a nation's stability and ability to grow and develop. We know from developments in other parts of the world that when women share decision-making power with men at higher levels, countries experience a higher standard of living too. Positive developments can be observed in key areas that fuel economic development, such as education, health and infrastructure.

It is well documented nowadays that women's participation also results in tangible gains for democratic governance and higher levels of satisfaction among the electorate regarding how a government is performing. When there is greater gender balance in government, voters tend to experience greater responsiveness to their needs, and in times of conflict, women are better able to negotiate and sustain peace.

Even political parties that take women's participation seriously stand to gain on a number of fronts. Most significantly, female voters outnumber male voters in most countries, including our own. So women voters do hold the potential to deliver the margin of victory in many elections, for parties that take their issues seriously. Women are also more likely to work across party lines and strive for consensus and cooperation.

There is also substantial evidence to suggest that gender-balanced decision-making bodies, including boards of governors, executive committees and judicial bodies, function better.

Temporary Special Measures

Special measures to increase women's effective participation in governance

"Equal consideration for all may demand very unequal treatment in favour of the disadvantaged." ~ Amartya Sen.

Bhutan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in August 1981 without any reservations. As required by the Convention, periodic reports on the status of women are submitted to the UN CEDAW Committee every four years, and the Committee forwards its recommendations to the state party.

Bhutan has submitted nine reports so far, and every time the recommendation has been for the country to adopt temporary special measures to address the gap in women's political participation. As a result, the NPAPGEEO was developed through a consultative process, with the objective of putting measures in place to enhance the participation of women in elected office. While part of the Action Plan is already being implemented, there is little progress on temporary special measures, due to legal implications. The next action in the pipeline is to carry out a review of the NPAPGEEO, with the participation of all key stakeholders, to come up with an effective and achievable action plan.

Countries around the world have developed and implemented temporary special measures, quotas, affirmative action, multi-sectoral measures addressing education, economic empowerment and ending violence against women, and fast-tracked systems of inclusion. The key idea behind such affirmative actions and measures is to address the structural barriers, subtle biases and gender differences that women face.

Depending on the local context, more than 80 countries have adopted varied electoral gender quotas by law. There are two types of gender quotas:

a. Candidate quotas are set most commonly in Latin America and Europe, through the gender composition of candidate lists

b. Reserved seats are most commonly used in Asia, the Arab region and Sub-Saharan Africa to regulate the gender composition of those elected.

France adopted a candidate quota by law system through the gender quota law in 1999, making it one of the first countries to adopt such a law that required 50 percent of all candidates nominated by each party to be women. This was closely followed by Argentina with the introduction of candidate quotas by law in 1991 requiring 30 percent of the candidates to be women.

Reserved seats quota by law have been adopted by Uganda, Jordan and India. In Uganda, special district seats are reserved for only women to compete. Jordan reserves 15 seats and follows "the best loser system" to select women who got the highest votes but were not elected. India reserves 30 percent

of the seats for women in the local government elections. Australia adopted voluntary quota in 1994 and uses a 35 percent voluntary quota system.

In Bhutan, the three National Consultations and two Conferences on Women in Politics held between 2013 and 2017 put forth the need for a Strategy and workable Action Plan. The National Plan of Action to Promote Gender Equality in Elected Office (NPAPGEEO) was developed as a temporary special measure. It included the following:

> Part A: Identifies and prescribes measures for creating a demand for women's participation.
>
> Part B: Focuses on a variety of interventions, such as creating awareness, and capacity-building, while providing the necessary support to create a level playing field to ensure that a consistent and adequate number of women contest the different elections.

The adoption of quotas has met with mixed reactions from both women and men in Bhutan. During the national conferences and consultations, it was felt that having a quota for women in elected office undermined the capacity and competency of women, and quotas alone would not be adequate to address the issue. On the other hand, some felt that if we were to wait till there was a change in the mindsets of people, it would take us a long time. Further, since there was a need to have role models to encourage female representation in elected office, the adoption of a quota system was felt to be crucial as a temporary special measure.

The Way Forward

According to two studies that were conducted — Women's Participation in Local Governance (NCWC 2011) and Improving Women's participation in Local Governance (RUB 2013) — the following factors have been identified as constraining women's political participation:

a. Education and training
b. Confidence levels
c. Functional language skills
d. Double or triple burden
e. Attitudes and stereotypes
f. Inadequate enabling environment for women's empowerment, and
g. Election system and processes.

The 2nd Conference on Women in Governance, Leadership and Politics, held in Thimphu in March 2017, highlighted the following strategies for increased participation by women:

h. Legislative reforms
i. Mechanisms to achieve the SDGs
j. Sustainable media campaigns
k. Partnership with civil society
l. Support groups
m. Involvement of diverse groups
n. Reservation of seats/quotas
o. Increased awareness and capacity building, and
p. Increased investments.

As discussed in the above conference, measures, and interventions to enhance the participation of women in politics would require a number of targeted special measures and actions on multiple fronts:

» Expanding the pool of qualified and capable women to run for elections;
» Transforming gender norms so that women leaders are accepted as legitimate and effective;
» Supporting women leaders in gender-sensitive political institutions;
» Creating an enabling legislative and policy environment to enhance women's participation;
» Establishing support systems for women candidates, such as flexitime, childcare provisions and breast-feeding facilities for candidates, voters and those in elected office;
» Awareness and advocacy programmes on gender equality, and promoting a gender-sensitive media;
» Portrayal of women leaders as role models through media; and
» Ensuring gender-responsive school curriculums and school environments.

The Thimphu Declaration drafted and endorsed on the third and final day of the 2nd National Conference entailed the Vision "Planet 40-60 by 2030 in governance, leadership and politics":

Thimphu Declaration Goals

Goal 1 (2018-2019): Ensure 30 percent of women candidature in the upcoming elections by political parties.
Goal 2 (2020-2021): Increase the number of women elected local leaders by 30 percent using fast track measures.
Goal 3: Increase the number of women executives and leaders in civil services/ public service by 25 percent by 2025.

The measures to realise the three goals comprise of creating an enabling environment for participation of women in politics, including review of legislation, formulation of policies, mainstreaming gender in political party charter and manifesto, conduct of targeted gender-responsive advocacy by media and CSOs, mentoring of aspiring women candidates, putting in place a gender-responsive election environment for increased voter participation turnout, and provide crèche and childcare facilities during elections and in public offices.

In the review of the NPAPGEEO, the recommendations of the conferences and the consultation meetings will be considered, including the adoption of temporary special measures to increase women's participation and representation in elected office.

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

Needrup Zangpo

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.

Some Impact of Democratic Politics in Bhutan

Tshering Palden, Tempa Wangdi

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.

Dr Karma Phuntsho On Bhutanese Democracy

After two successive elections and governments, Dr Karma Phuntsho shares some of his reflections on Bhutan's democracy and electoral practices with The Druk Journal.

The Druk Journal: How would you rate the introduction of democracy to Bhutan in the past 10 years?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: Democracy was not introduced to Bhutan in the past 10 years. It was already deeply ingrained in the Bhutanese cultural and philosophical outlook, which is informed by the Buddha's egalitarian principles and pursuit of freedom. Buddhism teaches freedom and enlightenment as the ultimate goals of life. Bhutan already had a profound and pervasive culture of democratic thought and practice, which was manifested particularly in the spiritual domain.

What was newly introduced in the past decade is the election of the bicameral parliament through votes, using a popular Western form of voting procedures. This is relatively new in Bhutan and it is taking time for people to get accustomed to it, but this was also introduced gradually with a series of preparations in the 20th century.

One very important thing for us to remember is that democracy is not just about the political exercise and electoral processes to elect the parliament. We need to promote democracy as a social ethos of freedom, conscientious citizenry, self-determination, and civil rights and responsibilities. There is a general tendency among the Bhutanese to identify democracy with just the political elections. People rarely talk about democracy in the judiciary system, governance, work place, and other contexts. Free and fair access to justice, with dignity, is as much a democratic right as electing a government. Similarly, equal opportunities of employment, equal pay for the same amount of work, physical access for people with special needs, consultative decision-making, right to information, fair reporting — to mention a few examples — are as important democratic practices as casting votes during elections.

The Druk Journal: What can we do to improve democracy as a political process?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: The most important thing is to make the democratic process as convenient and easy as possible for people to participate in, before they develop political apathy, which is disastrous for democracy. The Election

Commission of Bhutan is already making a lot of progress in this regard. The fact that many more people can avail themselves of postal ballot facilities in 2018 is a great improvement. Eventually, we should be able to make it easy for people to securely vote from anywhere in the world without even relying on postal ballots. After all, we are only fewer than half a million voters.

The Druk Journal: How can we enhance citizen participation in elections?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: Voter turn-out in the past elections was quite high compared with other countries, although it may dwindle in the future. In addition to making voting as easy as possible, we can also scrap the disfranchisement of religious persons. Except for some public religious figures, monks and priests should be allowed — and in fact persuaded — to bear the responsibility of electing the government to which we entrust the country for five years. The current rule prohibiting religious persons from voting contradicts the Constitution, and also does not align with Bhutan's own history and social culture, or with international norms such as the universal declaration of human rights. Religious persons, like civil servants, must remain apolitical, but should be given the right and responsibility to cast their vote.

The Druk Journal: Does the current system lead to a fair representation?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: While the current practice allows a fair representation within the given space, there are a few things we can do to actually expand the space.

Firstly, we could drop the requirement of a university degree through full-time education to stand as a candidate. While one can understand the initial reason for putting such a criteria in place, this is a disabling factor when it comes to political participation. It does not sit well with an individual's democratic right to stand for an office.

Given the diversity of colleges and courses across the globe, a university degree does not ensure the ability to be a leader and people's representative. Also, there are many great leaders who never went to college, even in our country.

Instead, it would be better to institute a standard examination, which can test the candidate's knowledge and awareness of national and international affairs and the ability to be a leader, similar to the literacy test for local government candidates and civil service exam for civil servants. This would keep off the unqualified and opportunistic candidates, some of whom may be joining to just avail themselves of the state election funding. The other thought regarding representation is a more complicated one for

some Bhutanese to understand. The first-past-the-post system we have adopted is easy to understand and implement, but it can result in a grossly unfair representation. In 2008, while People's Democratic Party got some 37 percent of total votes, it had only two seats in the National Assembly out of 47, so about 4 percent. The first National Assembly thus did not accurately represent the people's will. In the future, it may be good to think of having a more appropriate system of representation, perhaps combining first-past-the-post and proportional representation.

A third thought is about the two phases of National Assembly elections. While one can appreciate the rationale for having only two parties in the parliament, and how it can avoid hung parliaments, it deprives people of the opportunity to send the candidate of their choice to the parliament, if the candidate does not belong to the two leading parties. Moreover, one observes that elections in countries which adopt bipartisan systems are more fierce and vicious — giving rise to deep divisions in the community — than in countries where there are more than two parties in the parliament.

Although we did not have demonstrations and bloodshed, Bhutan's adoption of democracy has been a violent one in social and emotional respects. Families, friends, and communities have never before been so deeply divided and split apart as they were through party politics. Having more than two parties in the parliament may reduce the extremely polarised political discourse and debates, and diffuse some of the unwanted tensions and vitriolic exchanges.

The Druk Journal: Do you think that Bhutanese politicians are stereotypically and unfairly branded as being corrupt and unethical?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: Sadly, yes. This is a case of a bad cliché, which is widespread in the rest of the world, and the Bhutanese blindly follow. In all honesty, herd mentality is a problem in our country. People need to learn to be independent thinkers and also eschew stereotyping.

Not all politicians are corrupt or unethical, although there are some who may be wilfully unethical or making mistakes unwittingly. There are many politicians with stellar integrity. Having said that, it is important that politicians are kept under close scrutiny by the people, and held accountable for their misdeeds.

The Druk Journal: Gender has become an issue, given the relatively few women participants. Do you think that a quota for women parliamentarians is necessary to encourage women's representation?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: I could not agree more that female representation in the government and parliament is really dismal. Only about 8% of the government executives are female and we have only four elected women, out of 67 elected members in the current parliament. The prospect of having more elected in 2018 also looks poor.

Thus, it is a matter of serious concern for a country which had traditionally better gender parity than most countries in the world. We were and still are largely a matrilineal society, and a state which boasts of Vajrayana Buddhism, in which femininity is celebrated, and criticism of the female person is a major violation of religious precepts.

Low female representation in public offices today is certainly not because our women are not capable of taking up important positions and roles. If we look at the civil society sector, most of the big organisations are led by women. Similarly, in the private sector, many large business houses are run by women. Female principals head big private schools while the executive positions in government schools are still dominated by men.

We must find ways to empower and encourage women to take up political and public roles, and to eliminate cultural and social hurdles they face. While the state and the society need to find ways to enhance female participation in politics, I personally don't think offering quotas for women in the parliament is the right answer. The quota allocation goes against the fundamental democratic principles of equality and fair competition. It could also hamper the opportunity for our women to develop on par with men.

The Druk Journal: What can we do to ensure more professional youth participation in the future?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: There is currently a vibrant participation of youth in politics, both in numbers of youth who are standing for office and who are voting. What we need is to put more effort in educating the youth about democracy beyond and beside the political elections. There is also a need for better screening and grooming of quality candidates, and the type of examination suggested above can help.

The Druk Journal: Would you agree that the Election Commission of Bhutan regulations are a bit stifling? In election year, aren't there too many things that we are not allowed to do?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: We must appreciate that the Election Commission is doing what they can to ensure a free and fair election but, as I said earlier, we need to see democracy as being greater than politics. Human life is multi-faceted and complex; politics is only one aspect. As such, the political process of elections should not be inconvenience, let alone cancel, other processes of life. Stopping all events and gatherings throughout the long election season can cause tremendous economic, social and cultural damage, and loss. As it is, the productivity of the people, particularly farmers, will be less this year than in other years, with a series of campaign meetings, hustings, and ballots to take place.

So, it is important that people also carry on with other affairs of their life while also taking part in the elections. I came across friends who were deferring even their regular board meetings and office workshops due to the elections. My understanding is that the Election Commission requested the public to avoid gatherings which could be unfairly used as political platforms and lead to disputes. The Bhutanese electorate must use its political savvy and responsibility to ensure that no untoward or unlawful events take place, but we should not be required to suspend all gatherings and events.

The Druk Journal: What kind of political outcome can Bhutan expect in 2018?

Dr Karma Phuntsho: While it is premature to say anything about the party political outcomes in 2018, one thing is sure for Bhutan: The Bhutanese electorate have gained much more maturity and judiciousness by this third election season. Neither populist ideas and petty campaign promises nor charismatic personalities will easily sway the voters.

The educated elites in Thimphu and other urban areas will also have much less influence on the rural voters, compared with past elections. The Bhutanese electorate has also now become very sensitive to the externalities attempting to influence the process of elections. Many are going to look for candidates with high integrity and a far-sighted vision, but there is also a slight risk of some people making elections a farce, out of frustration.

Social Media and Democracy: Is Something Missing?

Stephan Sonnenberg

Much has been written about the impact of social media on democracy, especially in recent years. In part, this explosion of commentary on the role of social media came about as the result of several very high-profile elections, among them the presidential election in the United States, that some analysts believe were very heavily influenced— possibly even decided — because of efforts by foreign powers to sway popular opinion via social media channels.[1] Bhutanese policy makers, like everyone else, should be concerned about these very real forces that have come to influence more and more elections globally.

I must warn the reader that this article is written by an American expatriate grateful to be living in Bhutan. The article is heavily coloured by my own sombre view of what has happened to the United States' political culture over the past decade(s), juxtaposed with what I find to be a fairly healthy policy-making environment in Bhutan.

Furthermore, I am writing as someone who has never found much entertainment value in the various social media outlets that have increasingly come to define our communications landscape. I must therefore admit that this makes it a great deal easier for me to remain agnostic about a communication medium that, for a great many of my respected peers and colleagues, has become an important tool for their everyday work, socialising, and information gathering.

Fourteen years ago, the United States was immersed in a highly contentious election campaign. George W. Bush was running for re-election against a veteran politician from the opposition party, Senator John Kerry. Much of the election would revolve around issues of national security.

The 2004 election was held barely three years after the September 11 terrorist attacks, and at a time when the US had begun to feel the pain and cognitive dissonance of having launched two costly, deadly, and highly controversial wars.

In 2002, the US opened the Guantanamo Bay Detention Centre, which many international lawyers still consider to be illegal. In April of that year,

1 Matt Apuzzo and Sharon LaFraniere, "13 Russians Indicted as Mueller Reveals Effort to Aid Trump Campaign," New York Times (The), February 16, 2018.

news reports revealed that the US had been engaging in systematic torture of prisoners at its prison facilities in Iraq and Afghanistan. Large parts of the American population were grappling with the cognitive dissonance of wanting at once to support American troops fighting wars in faraway lands, while also feeling increasingly uncomfortable with those same wars that seemed to throw doubt on America's self-perception as a law-abiding and just international actor.

Given this context, Senator Kerry seemed to be a formidable political challenger. Prior to his political career, Senator Kerry served with distinction as a soldier in Vietnam before returning to the United States to engage in the anti-war movement, openly criticising American human rights abuses in Vietnam in the 1970s.

Meanwhile, concurrently, questions arose as to whether President George W. Bush might have failed even to fulfil his very limited service requirements as an air national guard reservist in Texas, spared from active duty in Vietnam.

One of the great ironies of the 2004 election was that a small group of President George W. Bush's supporters managed to turn what might have seemed to be Senator Kerry's greatest political strength into a weakness.

A group called the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth began to relentlessly attack Senator Kerry's military record, arguing that the several awards for bravery and injuries sustained as a captain of a so-called "swift boat" operating in hostile territory in Vietnam were undeserved. The group was funded by wealthy Republican donors and organised specifically to influence the election. It included among its members only one individual who had served with Senator Kerry during the Vietnam war. All other living members of Senator Kerry's unit, as well as key eyewitnesses at the time and publicly available military records, all supported the integrity of the Senator's actions.

The furore that erupted in response to the "swift boat" attack advertisements seemed only to further polarise the debate. The irony lies in the observation that there is no easy way to counter such an attack making conscious use of falsehoods. Ignore it and the myth grows to resemble an accepted truth; rebut it too vigorously and the debate persists, only to be drawn out and reinforced time and time again by those promoting the falsehood.

The episode entered the English lexicon and is today known as "swiftboating", namely to "target (a politician or political figure) with a campaign of personal attacks."[2]

2 Oxford Living Dictionaries, "swift-boat," *last accessed* February 17, 2018

Since that time "swiftboating" has remained a constant in American political discourse. Some of the same donors behind the 2004 swift-boat advertisements funded a similar attack campaign in 2008 accusing President Obama of having close ties to a radical underground group in Chicago.[3]

Later advertisements during the run-up to the 2012 elections alleged — again, contrary to all available evidence — that President Obama was not born in the United States (and thus not eligible to serve as President), or that he was a practicing Muslim.

The "swiftboating" continued in 2016, famously alleging that Secretary Hillary Clinton did nothing to prevent the attack by radical Islamists on the US Consulate in Benghazi, Libya, and the persistent allegations that Secretary Clinton had consciously sought to subvert the law by using a private email address for official business.

The existence of social media, coupled with the fact that more and more individuals today turn to social media for news and political commentary,[4] unleashed the full potential of "swiftboat" campaigners to influence pre-election political discourse.

No longer did a "swiftboat" campaign require massive start-up investments by wealthy financiers able to sponsor advertisements in traditional media. Anyone today can post "swiftboat" campaigns to any number of news forums, distribute information via anonymous social media accounts, or — for a modest fee — target paid "swiftboat"-style advertisements to a highly targeted audience of social media users.

"Swiftboaters" can easily mask politically motivated content in the form of seemingly legitimate news stories, dispensing with any illusions of transparency and accountability. Finally, *anyone* can act as a "swiftboat" entrepreneur, regardless of age, nationality, or even any particular standing to generate supposed "news" content.

A young man in a town called Veles, Macedonia, for example, recounts how in early 2016 he plagiarised a completely made-up online story about Donald Trump allegedly slapping a man at a campaign rally, re-posted it online, and — much to his astonishment — saw the story shared over 800 times, earning

3 Dan Morain, "Billionaire behind Swift Boat ads funded anti-Obama spot," Los Angeles Times, Aug. 23, 2008.

4 In late 2017, 67% of Americans reported getting at least some of their news through social media outlets, in particular Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Snapchat. Elisa Shearer and Jeffrey Gottfried, "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2017," Pew Research Center, (Sept. 7, 2017), available at http://www.journalism.org/2017/09/07/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2017/,

him over USD 150 in advertising revenue on his website.[5] Six months later, the man (who declined to give his name) had dropped out of high school and was earning an average of USD 4,000 per month (over 10 times the average monthly salary in Macedonia) running two pro-Trump websites.[6]

"These Macedonians on Facebook didn't care if Trump won or lost the White House," a journalist wrote in 2017. "They only wanted pocket money to pay for things— a car, watches, better cell phones, more drinks at the bar."[7]

Moreover, they were able to benefit from "countless alt-right websites in the US, which manufactured white-label falsehoods disguised as news on an industrial scale."[8] Thus, an unwitting alliance emerged between radical fringe groups in the United States — intentionally generating racist falsehoods designed specifically to incite religious or ethnic conflict — and an uncoordinated assortment of young internet entrepreneurs who realised they could make thousands of dollars by strategically re-posting and amplifying those falsehoods.

The first part of that alliance aimed to undermine the political consensus in the United States and legitimate white supremacism. The objective of the second part of that alliance was to recycle those stories and maximise the "clicks" they would receive from American voters.

Is Bhutan immune to this kind of an unholy alliance? There are, of course, those who would seek to slander Bhutan's noteworthy history of sustainable development. As an academic, I run into articles on a weekly basis gleefully insinuating that Gross National Happiness is nothing more than political sloganeering. Most of these authors have never been to Bhutan but seem genuinely outraged that a small Himalayan country would dare turn down international "best practices" in favour of its own vision of development.

When challenged, some make it their life mission to tarnish Bhutan (and countries pursuing alternative development strategies), especially when faced with suggestions that some of these strategies are bearing fruit. I can no longer count how many times I have been challenged to "be more rigorous" after suggesting that there was something the rest of the world could learn from Bhutan, simply because this idea runs counter to the standard narrative that wisdom must flow from the more "developed" Global North to the "developing" Global South.

5 Samanth Subramanian, "inside the Macedonian Fake-News Complex," WIRED (Feb. 15, 2017).
6 Id.
7 Id.
8 Id.

Furthermore, can we be sure that the enterprising and disaffected young man sitting in front of his computer screen in Macedonia might not also currently be looking at Bhutanese news blogs wondering if there might not also be some cash to be made out of the Bhutanese election?

Perhaps the Bhutanese election does not offer the same potential for ad revenue as the 2016 US Presidential elections, but then again, perhaps it would at least be worth a few extra bucks? In an era of global media access, all it takes is a quick google search to know precisely which countries around the world are gearing up to hold a national election and a few additional google searches to know which issues are the most likely to prove contentious.

This scenario does not even contemplate the potential for a much more sophisticated and well-financed effort by governments to influence elections in other countries. On February 16, for example, news broke in the United States that the US authorities had indicted 13 Russian citizens for running a "sophisticated network designed to subvert the 2016 election and to support the Trump campaign".[9]

Their intent, according to a high-ranking Justice Department official overseeing the investigation, was to "promote discord in the United States and undermine public confidence in democracy."[10] One Russian computer campaigner who had been hired as part of a large-scale "swiftboat" operation boasted how she had "created all these pictures and posts, and the Americans believed that it was written by their people."[11]

The US is not alone in this regard. Similar fears of foreign meddling in a national election have arisen in the context of the United Kingdom's "Brexit" vote (2016),[12] France's parliamentary elections (2017),[13] and Germany's national parliamentary elections (2017).[14]

9 Apuzzo, supra, note 1.
10 Id., quoting Deputy Attorney General Rod J. Rosenstein, who oversees the special investigation.
11 Id.
12 Adam, Karla and William Booth, "Rising Alarm in Britain Over Russian Meddling in Brexit Vote," Washington Post (The), November 17, 2017, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/rising-alarm-in-britain-over-russian-meddling-in-brexit-vote/2017/11/17/2e987a30-cb34-11e7-b506-8a10ed11ecf5_story.html?utm_term=.36ac7eca504b.
13 Farand, Chloe, "French Social Media Awash with Fake News Stories from Sources 'Exposed to Russian Influence' Ahead of Presidential Election," Independent, April 22, 2017, available at http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/french-voters-deluge-fake-news-stories-facebook-twitter-russian-influence-days-before-election-a7696506.html.
14 Stelzenmüller, Constanze, "The Impact of Russian Interference on Germany's 2017 Elections: Testimony," June 28, 2017, available at https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-impact-of-russian-interference-on-germanys-2017-elections/.

In each of these cases, speculation arose of a sophisticated effort, allegedly underwritten directly by Russia, to use social media strategies to destabilise the Euro-Atlantic alliance and foment support for anti-establishment parties in other countries. Other reports found similar social media strategies increasingly playing a role in national politics.

Freedom House, for example, found that 30 countries in 2017 were known to employ professional cadres of media activists tasked with promoting and defending "officially sanctioned" government narratives and policies via social media.[15] Those social media propagandists rely not only on their own persuasive power, but also on a host of powerful and difficult-to-detect strategies to amplify their messages, including "google bombs," "twitter bombs," fake grassroots movements often referred to as "astroturf," targeted advertising, social media "bots" ("fake social media profiles that appear to be connected to human users, but are really driven by algorithms"),[16] hacking known activists' accounts to spread disinformation or other compromising material, denial of service attacks on websites they seek to censor, etc.[17]

In response, some social media companies, notably Facebook, announced policy changes in response to the growing popular backlash against social media companies for enabling such "swiftboat" campaigns, claiming that these changes would make it more difficult to use social media to influence an election.[18]

And yet, as Sandy Parakilas, who led Facebook's efforts to fix privacy problems in 2012, described Facebook's approach to consumer protection issues: Their policy is often no better than to "react when the press or regulators make something an issue and avoid any changes that would hurt the business of collecting and selling data."[19]

One solution, of course, would be to simply stop relying on social media as a source of anything but *social* news — news about friends, vacations, babies, changed relationships, among many.

15 Kelly, Sanja, et. al., "Manipulating Social Media to Undermine Democracy: Freedom on the Net 2017," Freedom House, November 2017, available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTN_2017_Final.pdf.

16 Kupferschmidt, Kai, "Social Media 'Bots' Tried to Influence the U.S. Election. Germany may be Next." Science. September 13, 2017, available at http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/09/social-media-bots-tried-influence-us-election-germany-may-be-next.

17 Metaxas, Panagiotis T. and Eni Mustafaraj, "Social Media and the Elections," Science, October 26, 2012, available at http://science.sciencemag.org/content/338/6106/472.full.

18 Isaac, Mike, "Facebook Overhauls News Feed to Focus on What Friends and Family Share," New York Times (The), Jan. 11, 2018, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/11/technology/facebook-news-feed.html?smid=tw-share.

19 Parakilas, Sandy, "We Can't Trust Facebook to Regulate Itself," New York Times (The), November 19, 2017, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/19/opinion/facebook-regulation-incentive.html.

Evidence suggests that those individuals who get their news from traditional news sources, including online news sites such as www.kuenselonline.com, or www.thebhutanese.bt, or www.businessbhutan.bt, are more likely to trust political institutions whereas those individuals who get their news from social media are less likely to trust politics.[20]

Explaining their findings, the authors of one such study note that "traditional media outlets give coverage to political scandals, raising an alarm for the sake of restoring stability… Therefore, beside criticism, they also broadcast the attempts made by democratic political systems to reform themselves. Conversely, in the social media environment, such positive voices seem more hidden. Users become much more demanding of political institutions and this perpetuates distrust without generating a virtuous circle."[21]

But such a solution increasingly seems naïve, especially when many traditional news outlets and governments have realised that the tide has turned in favour of social media.[22] But even if we are comfortable with, or perhaps resigned to, the reality that social media will continue to function as an important source of news for growing numbers of citizens, we must realise that the social media companies themselves are designed — first and foremost — to generate record profits for themselves. They do so by commercialising our user data and by continually incentivising us to give them that data, primarily by rewarding us for putting as much of our private lives onto their platforms as possible.

In light of that realisation, it is us — we ourselves — who are collectively responsible for making social media a more reliable source of political discourse. As one US commentator noted in the wake of revelations that Russia manipulated the 2016 US presidential election: "Facebook and Twitter are just a mirror, reflecting us. They reveal a society that is painfully divided, gullible to misinformation, dazzled by sensationalism, and willing to spread lies and promote hate. We don't like this reflection, so we blame the mirror, painting ourselves as victims of Silicon Valley manipulation."[23] Instead, it would seem, we need to accept what the mirror is really showing us, and take a good hard look at how we as individuals interact via social media.

20 Andrea Ceron (2015), "Internet, News, and Political Trust: The Difference Between Social Media and Online Media Outlets," 20 J. of Computer-Mediated Communic'n 487.

21 Id.

22 *See e.g.,* Department of Information and Media, Ministry of Information and Communication, "Social Media Policy for the Government of Bhutan," Feb. 19, 2016, and Peter Ho, "Opinion: Is Balance of Trust Shifting from Political to Social?" *Straits Times (The),* Feb. 13, 2018.

23 Parker, Emily, "Silicon Valley Can't Destroy Democracy Without Our Help," New York Times, (The), November 2, 2017, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/02/opinion/silicon-valley-democracy-russia.html.

Where should we look, then, to find that personal sense of ethics as consumers, generators, or re-publishers of social media news content?

For one, we might derive inspiration from Bhutan's Constitution, which articulates both rights *and* responsibilities for Bhutanese citizens. Bhutanese citizens enjoy the right to freedom of speech (Article 7.2), the right to information (Article 7.3), the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 7.4), and freedom of press (Article 7.5).

So yes, the Constitution clearly opens the doors for all of us to express ourselves in the social media. At the same time, all Bhutanese citizens have, among other duties, the obligation to "foster tolerance, mutual respect and spirit of brotherhood amongst all the people of Bhutan transcending religious, linguistic, regional or sectional diversities," (Article 8.3).[24]

This second half of the Bhutanese Constitutional equation — namely, that individuals themselves carry significant responsibilities to keep Bhutan's democracy vibrant — is of supreme importance if Bhutan is to tame social media's propensity to facilitate "swiftboating," political polarisation, and attempts to manipulate political perceptions.

We might also draw inspiration from the numerous journalist codes of conduct drafted by media professionals seeking to balance their own rights as journalists with their responsibility to contribute positively to society.

The Code of Ethics for Journalists, for example, published by the Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority (BICMA), mandates that journalists "provide independent and accurate news and information with integrity, remain accountable for their actions, neutral in their position and keep the national interest foremost in their minds at all times" (Article 6, Code of Ethics).

The Code then sets forth 10 principles which journalists are encouraged to observe both in letter and spirit. These principles include "Social Responsibility: A journalist shall […] provide a full range of information to enable the public to make enlightened decisions." (Article 6.2.d), "Non-discrimination: A journalist shall […] resist those who would seek to buy or politically influence news contents…" (Article 6.4.1.d), and "Sensationalism: A Journalist shall avoid sensationalism in the reporting of events and take all possible precautions to ensure that anything published by him does not have the effect of inciting people into violence or other illegal acts." (Article 6.5.1).

24 The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, July 18, 2008.

To the extent we consider ourselves to be "citizen journalists" operating in social media, we should also take to heart those professional standards designed to protect the integrity of that vocation. And to the extent that we consume news over social media, we should never forget to demand those same high standards from those whom we trust as reliable sources of information.

Most importantly, perhaps, we should let ourselves constantly be reminded that politics work best when they respond to the "real-world" political community, the one that includes not just us and our like-minded friends, but also our neighbours, colleagues, classmates, friends, detractors, and all other sentient beings. If we do not find ways of communicating with integrity in that offline world, we risk the very soul of a democracy.

Social Media in Elections: What have We Wrought?

Emmanuel C. Lallana, PhD

Social Media -- a group of online tools that enable users to create and share content and to participate in social networking — has made citizen participation in determining their future a real possibility.

But in a very short period of time social media, most associated with Facebook and Twitter, has moved from being seen as a "boon" to becoming a "bane" to democracy.

The enthusiasm for social media as a democratising tool can be gleaned in the following post-2008 US Presidential elections commentary:

> "Obama's masterful leveraging of Web 2.0 platforms marks a major E-ruption in electoral politics — in America and elsewhere — as campaigning shifts from old-style political machines toward the horizontal dynamics of online social networks. The Web, a perfect medium for genuine grassroots political movements, is transforming the power dynamics of politics. There are no barriers to entry on sites like Facebook and YouTube. Power is diffused because everybody can participate."[1]

But within a decade, hope for transformation has been replaced by disappointment due to manipulation. Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2017 reported that "Online manipulation and disinformation tactics played an important role in elections in at least 18 countries over the past year, including the United States, damaging citizens' ability to choose their leaders based on factual news and authentic debate."[2]

1 Matthew Fraser and Soumitra Dutta Barack Obama and the Facebook Election US News and World Report, Nov. 19, 2008 https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2008/11/19/barack-obama-and-the-facebook-election

2 Freedom House "New Report - Freedom on the Net 2017: Manipulating Social Media to Undermine Democracy" https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-freedom-net-2017-manipulating-social-media-undermine-democracy

What Happened?

A truncated history

The emergence of social media as a tool in elections can be traced back to the 2008 US Presidential Election. It is widely accepted that Barack Obama changed electoral politics by using social media to reach out to voters, raise funds, and mobilise supporters.

Of course, Obama did not rely solely on social media to win elections. But, as noted by an observer: "The Obama campaign understood the power of complementing offline work with an online campaign. They systematically linked the online community to offline activities such as fundraising and volunteer mobilisation."[3]

Social media also helped Donald Trump win the 2016 US Presidential Elections. In the words of the Trump Campaign Digital Director, "Twitter is how [Trump] talked to the people, Facebook was going to be how he won."[4]

The Trump campaign deployed social media primarily for interacting with supporters and starting new conversations.[5] They also used social media for micro-targeting — "a marketing strategy that uses consumer data and demographics to identify the interests of specific individuals, or very small groups of like-minded individuals, and influence their thoughts or actions."[6]

Social media also plays an important role in elections where connectivity is poor and uneven and users are generally young urban voters.

In Indonesia, social media was first successfully used in the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial race.[7] Twitter and Facebook were used by candidates, parties, supporters, and the electorate. Jokoko Widowo (Jokowi) used social media innovatively to help him win the election. For instance, he used Twitter in the campaign to urge Jakarta residents to come up with humorous ways of combining his name with popular song titles.

3 Robin Effing, Jos van Hillegersberg and Theo Huibers "Social Media and Political Participation: Are Facebook, Twitter and YouTube Democratizing Our Political Systems?" https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-642-23333-3_3.pdf

4 Lois Becket "Trump digital director says Facebook helped win the White House" The Guardian 9 Oct 2017 in https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/08/trump-digital-director-brad-par-scale-facebook-advertising

5 https://www.wired.com/2016/11/facebook-won-trump-election-not-just-fake-news/

6 http://searchcio.techtarget.com/definition/microtargeting

7 Anders C. Johansson "Social Media and Politics in Indonesia" Stockholm School of Economics Asia Working Paper No. 42 December 2016 https://swopec.hhs.se/hascer/papers/hascer2016-042.pdf

In the 2014 Indonesian national elections, social media was used in official campaigns, political commentaries, voter information, election observation, and election reporting.[8] All political parties were active on social media. Jokowi — the social media savvy governor of Jakarta who had over 1.3 million Twitter followers (twice more than any other candidate) — was elected president.

Narendra Modi's victory in India's 2014 election has been attributed to his skilful use of social media. His campaign included a website (www.narendramodi.in), a Facebook page, Twitter, a Pinterest board, a YouTube channel, and profiles on Google+, LinkedIn, Tumbler, Instagram and a mobile app called India272+ to pass messages and organise volunteers.[9]

Towards the end of the 2014 election campaign, Modi wrote in a blog post: "This is the first election where social media has assumed an important role and the importance of this medium will only increase in the years to come."[10]

But how exactly has social media changed elections?

The Good

Tom Murse identified 10 ways that social media has changed political campaigns. Social media:

1. Enables candidates' direct contact with voters
2. Provides advertising without paying for it
3. Allows campaigns go viral
4. Permits tailoring the message to different segments of the electorate
5. Facilitates fundraising
6. Creates potential for controversy (by allowing a politician to send out unfiltered Tweets or Facebook posts that have landed many a candidate in embarrassing situations
7. Allows feedback from the electorate
8. Permits weighing of public opinion

8 Andrew Thornley "Indonesia's Social Media Elections" In Asia April 2, 2014 https://asiafoundation.org/2014/04/02/indonesias-social-media-elections/

9 Joyojeet Pal "Banalities Turned Viral: Narendra Modi and the Political Tweet" http://ai2-s2-pdfs.s3.amazonaws.com/acf0/a7a6291e11ab73b5bc1d55d39f6db13a9168.pdf

10 Avantika Chilkoti "Narendra Modi to be India's first social media prime minister" Financial Times May 23, 2014 https://www.ft.com/content/e347de5c-e088-11e3-9534-00144feabdc0

9. Engages young voters, and
10. Enables "The Power of Many" (by leveraging their numbers against the influence of powerful lobbyists and moneyed special interests).11

In the succeeding sections, we will focus on social media as a tool for marketing or selling the candidate, fundraising and mobilising supporters.

Marketing/Selling Candidate

As an election tool, social media's advantage over traditional media includes the following:

a. Allows politicians to communicate faster and reach voters in a more targeted manner without intermediaries, such as the mass media

b. Generates online reactions, feedback, conversations and debates

c. Provides support and participation for offline events, and

d. Extends audience reach when messages posted to personal networks are multiplied when shared.[12]

Social media is also celebrated for levelling the playing field between well-funded and "independent" candidates.

Social media helped Jaime Rodriguez ("El Bronco") become Mexico's first independent candidate to become state governor in 2015.[13] Subsequently, two other independent candidates — Pedro Kumamoto in Jalisco and Manuel Clouthier in Sonoma — successfully used social media to get elected.

In developing countries, where the state tightly regulates mass media, social media provides access to the electorate.

In India, political parties resorted to social media because traditional mass media is tightly regulated by the country's election body. In Cambodia's 2013 elections, social media "allowed the opposition to bring up issues of interest to young voters — human rights, social justice, corruption, education, and

11 Tom Murse "How Social Media Has Changed Politics: 10 Ways Twitter and Facebook Have Altered Campaigns" *ThoughtCo* August 16, 2017 https://www.thoughtco.com/how-social-media-has-changed-politics-3367534

12 The Role Played By Social Media In Political Participation And Electoral Campaigns https://epthink-tank.eu/2014/02/12/the-role-played-by-social-media-in-political-participation-and-electoral-campaigns/

13 Cesar Fabian Garcia Jimenez "Impact of Social Media in Latin America" Linkedin.com September 21, 2015 https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/impact-social-media-latin-america-cesar-fabian-garcia-jimenez

unemployment."[14] During this election, social media "created a nascent and more pluralistic online political environment where Cambodians exchange different political viewpoints freely."[15]

Fundraising

Social media has also been used for political fundraising, particularly in developed countries. Its advantage is that it makes donating to a political campaign easy — all one needs to do is to click on the donate buttons on the relevant Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube accounts.[16]

In 2008, as well as in 2012, skilful use of social media allowed the Obama campaign to raise millions of dollars from small contributors. For instance, in 2012, the Obama campaign was able to raise USD 6.5 Million (M) from 3 M donors.[17]

It was not only in US presidential elections where we see the power of social media as fundraiser. A study of the use of Twitter in raising campaign contributions for politicians who ran for the US Congress showed that "using Twitter more informatively is associated with a greater increase in donations received..."[18] The study concludes that the adoption and use of social media offer a relatively cost-effective alternative technology to communicate with the electorate, and reduce the gap in fundraising opportunities between new and experienced politicians, which, in turn, reduce barriers to entry to national politics and increase political competition.[19]

Mobilisation

Another critical role of social media in electoral campaigns is in animating and mobilising campaign volunteers and staff.

The Obama campaigns demonstrated how social media can be used simultaneously to empower grassroots activities and retain central monitoring and training in order to keep message and campaign discipline.[20]

14 Sophat Soeung Social Media's Growing Influence on Cambodian Politics Asia Pacific Bulletin July 23, 2013 https://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/apb_222.pdf
15 Ibid
16 https://www.techrepublic.com/article/election-tech-why-social-media-is-more-powerful-than-advertising/
17 https://npengage.com/nonprofit-marketing/social-media-fundraising-2012-presidential-election/
18 Maria Petrova, Ananya Sen, Pinar Yildirim "Social Media and Political Donations: New Technology and Incumbency Advantage in the United States" September 8, 2016 https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/sites/gsb/files/working-paper-faculty-seminar-dmc-soical-media-political-donations.pdf
19 Ibid
20 Rachel K Gibson "Party change, social media and the rise of 'citizen-initiated' campaigning" *Party Politics* 2015, Vol. 21(2) 183–197 http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1354068812472575

In the 2008 elections, the My.BarackObama.com social network site allowed supporters to join the campaign using only an email address. Once registered, these supporters, without need for permission from campaign HQ, organised events, set up fundraising sites, and engaged in getting out the vote efforts on behalf of candidate Obama. The site is credited for enabling more than 35,000 local organising groups in all 50 states to host over 200,000 events and make millions of phone calls to neighbours in support of Obama.[21]

The Labour party in the 2017 UK General Elections also deployed social media in mobilising the base. Observers believed that the Labour Party won this election "because the party used Facebook, Twitter and online videos to build and motivate its voter base, rather than to attack the Conservatives".[22] As noted by a social media practitioner:

> "It's about building a movement, and social media can provide the glue for people to bind together. If your strategy is to poke holes in the other side, you don't evoke that emotion of togetherness which is an important factor in getting people to vote."[23]

The use of social media for mobilisation has given rise to "citizen-initiated campaigning" or CIC. CIC is "a new model of web campaigning that generates an additional 'free' pool of labour to carry out core tasks during an election".[24] For Rachel Gibson:

> "The innovative aspect of CIC... lies in the extent of ordinary citizen input that occurs in their initiation and execution via digital media. So while not becoming equal partners in the election enterprise, grassroots casual supporters are given a stronger 'co-producing' role in the campaign than has hitherto been the case."[25]

21 Heather Havenstein "My.BarackObama.com social network stays online after election" *Computerworld* Nov 10, 2008 in https://www.computerworld.com/article/2534052/web-apps/my-barackobama-com-social-network-stays-online-after-election.html

22 Robert Booth and Alex Hern "Labour won social media election, digital strategists say" *The Guardian* June 2017 https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/09/digital-strategists-give-victory-to-labour-in-social-media-election-facebook-twitter

23 Ibid. The quote is from Jag Singh, founder of MessageSpace, which buys social media, internet and print advertising and provided services to the Conservative campaign

24 Rachel K Gibson "Party change, social media and the rise of 'citizen-initiated' campaigning" Party Politics 2015, Vol. 21(2) 183–197 http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1354068812472575

25 Ibid

The Bad

Twitter bombs, Astroturf, and buying online search ads are among the unscrupulous use of social media in elections.
"Twitter bombs" are unsolicited tweets, purported replies to previous discussions, to get a user's attention to specific causes.[26] For maximum impact, they are deployed through "bots" — software that runs automated tasks.

"Astroturf" is the use of Twitters to create fake grassroots movements.[27] They are created to pressure targeted journalists or influencers by challenging the latter's reporting or views, and/or by informing them that their reporting/ views are not appreciated by a "significant" group.

Buying online search ads is an expensive, but equally effective, way to spam voters.[28] Buying these ads allows one's page to appear at the top of the search results in queries about a political opponent. Another advertising tool that is used is "promoted trends" in Twitter.

"Hashtag poisoning" is another egregious use of social media in politics. Here bots are used to flood anti-government hashtags with irrelevant posts in order to bury any useful information. In Mexico, "penabots" first appeared in its 2012 election in support of the candidacy of Enrique Peña. They have since evolved and are now deployed to combat protests and attack critics of the Mexican government.[29] This development does not auger well for Mexican politics because, as pointed out by a commentator:

> "…social media is the new public square. Mexicans are relying on these networks to get their news out to the world and to communicate with each other... When these networks are manipulated, it is extremely damaging to Mexican society and free speech."[30]

26 Panagiotis T. Metaxas, Eni Mustafaraj "Social Media and the Elections" *Science* 26 Oct 2012 Vol. 338, Issue 6106, pp. 472-473 http://science.sciencemag.org/content/338/6106/472.full
27 Ibid
28 Ibid.
29 Klint Finley "Pro-Government Twitter Bots Try To Hush Mexican Activists" *Wired* https://www.wired.com/2015/08/pro-government-twitter-bots-try-hush-mexican-activists/
30 https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/z4maww/how-mexican-twitter-bots-shut-down-dissent

Fake News

Fake news has also been deployed in elections. Claire Wardle believes that the term "fake news" does not capture the full breadth of misinformation (the inadvertent sharing of false information) and disinformation (the deliberate creation and sharing of information known to be false) being deployed for partisan political purposes.[31] For her, there are seven different types of mis- and disinformation that are currently being used: Satire/parody, misleading content, imposter content, fabricated content, false connection, false context, and manipulated content.

But whether we call it fake news, misinformation or disinformation, it is also clear that social media can be easily used to spread them. For instance, Facebook's targeted advertising — "the ability to target ads based on hundreds of parameters, to get their messages in front of exactly who they want, for a relatively small sum" — may be good for business but it can also be used for propaganda.[32]

According to Freedom House, fake news was deployed during elections or referendums to influence outcomes in at least 16 of 65 countries.[33]

In the Philippines, a "keyboard army" — whose members earned USD 10 per day operating fake social media accounts that supported Rodrigo Duterte or attacked his detractors — was deployed in the run-up to the May 2016 presidential election;

Venezuelan government agents regularly used manipulated footage to disseminate lies about opposition protesters on social media, creating confusion and undermining the credibility of the opposition movement ahead of elections;

In Kenya, users readily shared fake news articles and videos bearing the logos of generally trusted outlets such as CNN, the BBC, and NTV Kenya on social media and messaging apps during the August 2017 election campaigns.[34]

31 Claire Wardle, "Fake news. It's complicated." *First Draft* February 16, 2017 https://firstdraftnews.org/fake-news-complicated/

32 John McDuling "How fake news spreads on Facebook, and why it's so difficult to stop" *The Sydney Morning Herald* Oct 20 2017 http://www.smh.com.au/business/innovation/how-fake-news-spreads-on-facebook-and-why-its-so-difficult-to-stop-20171017-gz31v1.html

33 Freedom House *Freedom on the Net 2017: Manipulating Social Media to Undermine Democracy* https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2017

34 Ibid.

At least three conditions helped in the rise of fake news. Firstly, there is the growing distrust in traditional mass media, and/or perception of media control by powerful interests. Secondly, in the case of FB, the algorithm that determines which stories come out of one's news feed, "tended to promote viral or provocative articles that generate clicks, regardless of the veracity of their content".[35]

Thirdly, "people who get news from Facebook (or other social media) are less likely to receive evidence about the true state of the world that would counter an ideologically aligned but false story."[36]

But do fake news help sell candidates? To properly understand the role of fake news in elections, we must consider three points.

Firstly, while social media has become an important source of political news and information, television remains the more important source. Secondly, a new study on fake news consumption during the 2016 US presidential campaign shows that, while a significant number of Americans have been exposed to fake news, only a small percentage of Americans are heavy consumer of fake news:

> "One in four Americans visited a fake news website from October 7 - November 14, 2016. Trump supporters visited the most fake news websites, which were overwhelmingly pro-Trump. However, fake news consumption was heavily concentrated among a small group — almost 6 in 10 visits to fake news websites came from the 10 percent of people with the most conservative online information diets."[37]

Thirdly, a fake news article is as persuasive as a TV campaign advertisement. As noted by Allcott and Gentzkow:

> "…exposing voters to one additional television campaign ad changes vote shares by approximately 0.02 percentage points. This suggests that if one fake news article were about as persuasive as one TV campaign ad, the fake news in our database would have changed vote shares by an amount on the order of hundredths of a percentage point."[38]

35 Ibid.
36 Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* Spring 2017 in https://web.stanford.edu/~gentzkow/research/fakenews.pdf
37 Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan & Jason Reifler Selective Exposure to Misinformation: Evidence from the consumption of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, January 9, 2018 https://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/fake-news-2016.pdf
38 Allcott and Gentzkow "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election"

While these studies are US-centric, they do not support the view that fake news help gain new voters. Rather, it supports the hypothesis that fake news is more useful in energising the candidates' supporter base. Another troubling development in the use of social media in elections is its utilisation by external/foreign powers to influence the popular vote.

A report prepared by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the National Security Agency (NSA) disclosed that Russia launched an operation to influence the outcome of the 2016 US presidential election.[39] The objectives were to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, harm the electability of Hilary Clinton, and help elect Donald Trump.

The report also divulged that "Moscow's influence campaign followed a Russian messaging strategy that blends covert intelligence operations — such as cyber activity — with overt efforts by Russian Government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users or trolls".[40] Furthermore, the US intelligence community believes that "Moscow will apply lessons learned from its Putin-ordered campaign aimed at the US presidential election to future influence efforts worldwide, including against US allies and their election processes".[41]

The Future

As social media becomes more mainstream, its role in elections, for better or worse, will continue to grow.

A good development is that Facebook has responded to public pressure and has agreed to change its algorithm. In January 2018, FB founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg promised to prioritise posts from family and friends and ensure that the public content seen in newsfeeds will be those that encourage meaningful interactions between people. Whether the trolls and their masters can find new ways to game the new algorithm for partisan political purposes remains to be seen.

If Facebook fails to control the spread of fake news and other efforts to use the platform to promote mis- and dis-information, more government regulation of Facebook, particularly during elections, will be forthcoming.

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39 Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections ICA 2017-01D January 6, 2017, p. ii https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf

40 Ibid

41 Ibid, p. iii

Already, Bhutan's Election Commission:

1. Mandates that "any tweet, comment or opinion of a candidate or political party or their authorised representative must be in conformity with the Election Code of Conduct"

2. Prohibits the upload of "new materials in the 48-hour period of no campaign restrictions duration," and,

3. Asks all "to refrain either from use of Social Media under anonymous identity or fake addresses or carry out activity or post content that may adversely affect or unduly benefit the electoral prospects of a Candidate or Party".[42]

Recently, French President Emmanuel Macron announced plans for a new law, or tougher rules for online content during elections.[43] The future will also see increased use of analytics on social media data. Analytics "is the discovery, interpretation, and communication of meaningful patterns in data".[44] When applied to social media data (generated from the campaigns' interactions with voters) analytics will enable the campaign "to directly micro-target potential voters and donors with tailored messages".[45]

Conclusion

In is not unreasonable to think that social media, regardless of actions taken by social media platforms and/or government regulations, will be the future of elections.

However, it is also important to remember that social media is not a silver bullet. It cannot win with un-winnable candidates. As noted by James Gomez about the use of Social Media in Malaysian elections:

> "Yet, in spite of the time and resources dedicated by (the dominant political party and its leader) in improving their online presence in time for the 2013 general election, they still could not arrest the erosion of support from Malaysian voters."[46]

42 Election Commission of Bhutan "Notification On Social Media" 09/04/2013 http://www.ecb.bt/?p=137
43 Emmanuel Macron: French president announces 'fake news' law *BBC News* 3 January 2018 http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42560688
44 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Analytics
45 George Shen "Big data, analytics and elections" *Analytics* January/February 2013 http://analytics-magazine.org/big-data-analytics-and-elections/
46 James Gomez Malaysia's 13th General Election: Social Media and its Political Impact https://mediamalaysia.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/GE13_Social_Media_James_Gomez-090913.pdf

From the Political Parties

2018 being a year when the Bhutanese electorate must choose a government for the next term, The Druk Journal requested the four registered political parties to respond to the following questions:

Please describe your party - its history and membership:

What is your party's vision and ideology - what policies do you stand for?

What are your priorities for the next five years and beyond?

What changes or innovative policies will you ask the electorate to support?

What are your strengths?

How are you different from the other parties?

In this section, we have responses from three parties (alphabetical order): Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT), Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT), People's Democratic Party (PDP).

The Druk Journal did not receive a response from Bhutan Kuen-Nyam Party (BKP).

Bhutan Kuen-Nyam Party

Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa

Druk Phuensum Tshogpa

People's Democratic Party

Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa

The Birth of Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa

When democracy came to Bhutan in 2008, it began on a hopeful note. It came as a gift from the Golden Throne to the people of Bhutan. As was articulated by His Majesty The King to the newly elected members of the National Council in 2013, the Royal Vision was that of a democracy that served as a means towards achieving national goals – of enhancing the peace, harmony, and sovereignty of the country, and of fulfilling the aspirations of the people.

Over the last one-decade, we have seen the good of democracy – the power of people to elect the government of their choice, and to change the government if it fails to serve them well. We have also seen the ills of democracy – the division it wrought in our small society, and the risks of losing sight of the country's long-term interests in the light of short-term partisan interests. Experiences from around the globe in the recent years – Trump phenomenon, and Brexit, for example – have reminded us of the perils of a democratic system.

As principal actors in a democratic process, political parties have a key role in shaping the kind of democracy we want. Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) was born out of the hope that, as a political entity, it can harness the power of democracy better to benefit our country and the people; out of the fear that some of the ills of democracy that we have witnessed, if not remedied early on, could put the future of our country and the people at stake; and out of the realisation that for our people to counter the ills, and harness the good, they need the choice of a better political party.

Our Context and Our System – The Fundamentals

Given their dominant role in shaping our democratic process, it is crucial that our political parties see our democracy in the right perspective. While the basic ideals and principles apply across the spectrum, democracies around the world differ from one another in both form and design. By the same token, Bhutan's democracy is also uniquely designed, and operates in an environment unique to a small country like Bhutan.

Should our political parties and citizens attempt to function without taking adequate stock of our system, and the unique circumstances under which it operates, our democracy will neither serve to strengthen our sovereignty nor help to fulfil the aspirations of our people. In Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa's view, two facts about our situation deserve special emphasis and attention.

Firstly, ours is a small, landlocked, least developed state struggling to breathe life in a geopolitically difficult terrain. The primary preoccupation or an end goal of a small state in the international political game is to survive. To survive, the rules of international politics would normally prescribe that we acquire what it takes – military, economic, demographic, among others - to defend ourselves against the external threats. Bhutan had neither the military power nor the demographic or economic strength. Given these facts, it is amazing how Bhutan managed to survive when similar small states in the region have long disappeared into history. In this regard, history tells us that we were able unite our forces together and act as one, despite centuries of internal strife and civil war, whenever and wherever the external threats arose – whether it was from the British Empire in the south or Tibetans and Mongols in the north. Our strength to survive as a nation came from unity and harmony within the country.

Secondly, we must know that ours is a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy which is different from the systems of democratic governance elsewhere. It combines the best of both Democracy and Monarchy – indeed, Bhutan's democracy was conceived and grew out of the womb of Monarchy. Under our Constitution, His Majesty The Druk Gyalpo is the Head of State, and the symbol of unity of the Kingdom and People of Bhutan (Section 1, Article 2). It is a system designed to get the best out of democracy, and to prevent the pitfalls of democracy, which has become evermore evident in democracies around the world including in the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Our visionary Kings foresaw the downsides of democracy long before they manifested in those countries although many might have seen the wisdom behind the design of our system only in recent years.

It would appear that these fundamentals of our nation and our system do not need to be explained. But many a times, over the last one decade of our journey as a democracy, Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa has felt like these fundamentals were being challenged either consciously or unconsciously. This is evident in the deep polarisation of our society along the party lines. If we allow the political divide of the kind we have seen in the last ten years, to linger and become more entrenched, it will destroy the unity, harmony, and stability – the bedrocks of our nation.

Similarly, the tendency to pursue short-term political goals at the cost of long-term national goals, the approach of personality-based politics, and the undue influence of money in politics have been equally worrying.

Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa believes that such political tendencies will not only fail to serve the aspirations of our people, but also put the very future of our country at stake. We believe that now is the time to right these wrongs. In this election, we must stop further polarisation of our society along the lines of the two old parties. We must focus once again on making democracy relevant to the common people and pursuing long-term goals of our country to make our future secure.

Bridging the Gap – The *Nyamrup* Spirit

One of the primary concerns that preoccupied Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa right from the beginning was that of the widening gap between the rich and poor. Divides are also occurring between the rural and urban population. The divides are further exacerbated by the tendency towards crony-capitalism that is slowly creeping into our system. If the economic disparities in our society are not addressed urgently they will lead to adverse consequences like the ones we have seen in countries around the world in recent years.

For democracy to be real and effective, it must benefit and empower all citizens including the poor and the marginalised equally. The pursuit of freedom, justice, and happiness are the basic aspirations of all people. Every citizen should be able to pursue these aspirations within a peaceful and secure space allowed by our political system.

Given these realities and facts, narrowing the gap between the rich and poor is one agenda that is very close to the heart of Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa. In fact, the idea of bridging the gap between the rich and poor is the lens through which the party looks at its social, political, and economic agenda. We believe this idea will lead to a more harmonious society, a stronger nation, and happier citizens.

Therefore, if there is one thing that distinguishes Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa from other parties, it is the party's singular focus on narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor.

Conclusion

This year, this election, we are at a crossroads. The choice we make in this election will shape the very nature of our democracy and the future of our country. DNT believes that, together, with the people of Bhutan, we can make our democracy work. Together, we can secure our future.

Druk Phuensum Tshogpa

Introduction

Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) was founded in 2007 and is one of the two oldest political parties in the country. DPT is dedicated to realising the vision of our Kings. It is committed to the creation of a unique democratic culture, the fabric of which is woven from the threads of our spiritual, cultural, and historical wealth. The party is inspired by the highest standards of ethics and principles. DPT believes that the pursuit of good democracy begins with the electoral process itself since the values and means by which a party comes to power will shape the way in which it will govern. Likewise, the voters too have the shared responsibility of participating in the electoral process.

Druk Phuensum Tshogpa is unique in that it is not founded by its 'leaders' but by the people themselves. The so called leaders in the party are recruits called upon by the people to serve the nation. Those who have heeded the call include former ministers and an impressive array of senior government officials and professionals from all walks of life including the private sector. The youth and women are well represented to complement the wisdom and experience of the elders with dynamism. Our collective leadership capacity is noteworthy.

Party's Vision and Mission

Druk Phuensum Tshogpa's vision is to contribute towards a vibrant democracy, where every Bhutanese would pursue happiness in an environment of peace, prosperity, equity, and justice. It hopes to achieve this vision by pursuing the following mission goals:

1. To achieve economic self-reliance by the year 2020.
2. To eradicate poverty, raise the standard of living and enable pursuit of happiness through regionally balanced development.
3. To strengthen the legal, institutional, and administrative foundations of democracy.
4. To ensure prevalence of the Rule of Law.
5. To promote harmony, peace, and security within Bhutan and the world.
6. To ennoble politics and politicians so that they are worthy of public trust.
7. To serve with humility and devotion.

DPT is dedicated and committed to serving the *Tsa-wa-Sum*; His Majesty The King, Country and People, the state of the core of our being and the three elements of our nationhood. It is of the firm belief that the *Tsa-wa-Sum* must forever form the essence of our dreams and must always flourish.

In pursuing the noble vision of our Kings, our party has adopted "growth with Equity and Justice" as the core value that will guide the party in its endeavours. We see these as the noble means to the noblest end. Justice is the fundamental condition for continued peace, progress, and stability of nations just as equity is the means to harmony and sustainable prosperity.

Why Druk Phuensum Tshogpa?

DPT is the only party that has experience both as a government and opposition with significant number of members. Among them are highly qualified professionals from various backgrounds and fields of expertise, experienced bureaucrats who have served in leadership positions for decades, and committed youth who do not see their choice of politics as an option but a cause to serve the *Tsa-wa-Sum*.

DPT as the Government (2008-2013)

DPT was the first democratically elected government that came to power with a landslide majority in 2008 winning 45 of the total 47 seats. Since it was an unchartered territory, DPT faced numerous daunting challenges during the formative days. The glare of our expectant public and that of the international community were upon us and every move we made was scrutinised, analysed, and judged by the public and the media. Our actions were often put through the highest standards of moral compass and performance barometers. Despite those seemingly insurmountable challenges, we have reasons to believe that we did well for the following reasons:

1) In any democratic system, the transition is rife with controversies and teething problems. However, DPT was able to see through the transition without any major problems.
2) The success and failure of a democratic government is judged by the fulfillment or non-fulfilment of its campaign pledges. For the period 2008 – 2013, DPT prepared a broad range of 153 pledges encompassing almost all sectors of our country's socio-economic domain.

Despite numerous formidable challenges, at the end of our term in 2013, we were able to fulfill 151 pledges (98 percent) and only 2 pledges remained unfulfilled (2 percent). To justify our claim of achieving 98 percent of our pledges, the following are some of our major achievements that impacted the lives of every single Bhutanese:

i) Started 5 hydropower projects – Dagachu, Punatsangchu I & II, Mangdechu, and Nikachu.

ii) Expanded our road networks by 5,980 kilometers (3,400 km of farm road) easing the drudgery of having to walk long distances and opening up markets to farm produces.

iii) Provided electricity to some 40,000 households, illuminating people's lives and enhancing economic opportunities.

iv) Enabled mobile phone connectivity to all 20 dzongkhags, 205 gewogs and almost all villages, facilitating the ease of communication and bridging the gap of geographical distance.

v) Took education to the doorstep by opening up Extended Class Rooms (ECR) all over the country, eventually achieving 100 percent Universal Primary Enrolment.

vi) Likewise, the health sector received one of the highest priorities and annual budget allocated to the sector was consistently one of the highest. The system of 'mobile ambulance' was initiated for the first time to save precious lives and ease the burden of scarce transportation facility in rural areas. We fulfilled our pledge of providing 2 doctors and 2 ambulances to every dzongkhag hospital.

vii) While our campaign pledge was to bring down the unemployment rate to 2.5 percent (full employment as per ILO's definition), through concerted efforts of planning, programming, and implementation of effective employment policies, we were able to bring down the rate of unemployment from 4.1 percent (2008) to 2.1 percent (2013) exceeding our target and expectations.

viii) Finally, the cumulative impact of all the aforementioned achievements were manifested in the reduction of poverty from 26.7 percent to a mere 12 percent at the end of our term.

The foregoing are not an exhaustive list of our achievements but just some of our major accomplishments quoted to lend credence to our claim that we are a party with a proven track record in terms of leadership and performance.

DPT as the Opposition (2013-2018)

As the Opposition Party in the Parliament, we have been guided by the vision of our Monarchs and the provisions of our sacred Constitution. We have served as an exemplary opposition party and have allowed the government of the day to function without undue disruption. We have been steadfast in our commitment to be a responsible and constructive opposition.

To this end, we have been supportive of all government actions and policies that carried the scope and prospect to bring larger benefits to our country and the people. We have provided our support in passing the annual budgets and other legislative instruments introduced in the National Assembly. However, where we felt that the government was introducing policies and programmes that do not benefit our people, we have expressed our concerns and views on them. Some of our noteworthy opposition were on the following issues:

i. **Corporatisation of Jigme Dorji Wangchuck National Referral Hospital**: We opposed the government's plan to corporatise our country's biggest and busiest hospital. Our action has ensured that health services for our people remains free at all times as enshrined in the Constitution.

ii. **Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal Motor Vehicle Agreement**: We expressed deep concern on the ratification of this Agreement in the best interest of our people and nation.

iii. **Establishment of Rural Enterprise Development Corporation Limited (erstwhile Business Opportunity and Information Centre**): We repeatedly expressed concern and opposed the establishment of these institutions and recommended that the responsibility be entrusted to existing financial institutions.

iv. **Central Schools**: While we supported the concept of establishing Central Schools, we had made a number of recommendations to improve their functioning and sustainability.

In addition to the above, we have also raised serious concerns on the government's populist measures like the purchase of helicopters, supply of power tillers, Boleros, reduction and exemption of taxes and fees, farms shops, and many others, that promotes peoples' dependency on the government which in turn increases our country's dependence on external aid. These populist measures of the government will pose serious challenges and difficulties in achieving our country's cherished goals of self-reliance and strengthening of national sovereignty and security.

In gist, our performance track record of having achieved 98 percent of our campaign pledges as the country's first democratically elected government is unparalleled and has set a high benchmark for all political parties. As the Opposition Party, we have been exemplary in our performance. We have shouldered the responsibility with full dedication and loyalty and have set good precedence for future opposition parties.

Therefore, if given the mandate to govern the country again, we solemnly pledge to establish a government that is caring and responsive while subjecting ourselves to transparency, accountability, and public scrutiny. To this end, we will always keep an ear for even the loneliest and feeblest cry for help. We will articulate through policies, the shared hopes and aspirations of the people and devise means for their realisation, keeping both the short-term needs and long-term interests of the nation and the people.

In view of the aforementioned vision, performance and commitment to serve the *Tsa-wa-Sum* with unwavering loyalty and *tha damtsi*, it is our humble hope and prayer that the people of Bhutan will find reasons for placing your trust in Druk Phuensum Tshogpa.

People's Democratic Party

On 1st September 2007, People's Democratic Party (PDP) got registered as the first political party in the country. As we celebrate our 10-year journey and service to *Tsa-wa-Sum*, it gives us an opportunity to reflect on our past and look at our present and the future: where we came from, where we are now and where we want to be. We also take this opportunity to introspect and look at our own values, ideology, priorities, achievements—and our hopes and aspirations.

Vision, Values, and Ideology

In Gross National Happiness (GNH), we already have a long-term vision for our nation. Within the guiding philosophy of GNH, our long-term goal for Bhutan is a nation with secured sovereignty that is economically prosperous and vibrant, environmentally rich, socio-culturally just and harmonious, and politically united that allow the pursuit of happiness by every Bhutanese. Our aspiration for Bhutan is a prosperous and peaceful nation with highly educated and economically and spiritually rich people, living happily and harmoniously under the compassionate leadership of *Wangchuck Juedzin*.

We believe in our timeless value of *Tha Damtse*. We believe in prosperity and social security for all. We believe in liberty, justice, and equal opportunity for all. We believe in hard work, integrity, humility, and compassion.

Our ideology, *Waangtse Chhirpel*, like GNH, is a precious idea that emerged from the selfless compassion and wisdom of His Majesty The Fourth Druk Gyalpo. We believe *Waangtse Chhirpel* is the best pathway to GNH. We believe we can make our democracy a great success through *Waangtse Chhirpel*. We believe the most meaningful and sustainable development and democracy is the one that takes place through decentralisation of power and shared responsibility, which is the real essence of *Waangtse Chhirpel*.

History and Past Achievements

Bhutan is what it is today—a special nation—because of our great kings. Since 1907, our Kings ended all internal conflicts, united the nation and took us on a journey of unprecedented peace, progress, and development. As a political party and citizens of this blessed nation, we remain grateful to our Kings and *Wangchuck Juedzin*. And we move forward with unwavering faith and confidence that, under the continued guidance

of our King, we will unleash the great promise of our nation and people. The result of the first parliamentary election in 2008 was a huge disappointment. We secured only two seats in a 47-member National Assembly. Most people felt the party had no future. But we never lost hope and our commitment to serve. We kept the party going—and gradually rebuilt it from the ground up. Despite being the world's smallest opposition party, we worked hard, provided checks and balances, and stood for the *Ts-wa-Sum*. We kept the government accountable to the people—and ensured that everybody followed the democratic process, rule of law, and the constitution. At the same time, when the government's actions and policies were in the interest of the nation and people, we provided full cooperation and support.

In 2013, we got elected to form the government. Since then, we have worked hard and have achieved huge progress in all aspects of our nation's socio-economic development. When we took over the governance, our economy was in deep trouble and there was no fund for implementation of the 11th Five-Year Plan (FYP). We were facing severe Indian rupee shortage and banks had stopped giving loans. Our immediate challenge then was to mobilise funds for the 11FYP and rescue our economy from going into a deep recession.

Under His Majesty The King's guidance and support from highly committed civil servants, and our well wishers and friends, we managed to mobilise funds we needed for the 11FYP. And, within last four years or so, we have successfully completed almost all 11FYP projects. Our economy has not only recovered but is growing at an unprecedented pace. Today, we are the third fastest growing economy in the world with an average growth rate of more than 8 percent. And the International Monetary Fund recently forecasted that our GDP would grow by 11.2 percent in 2018, making Bhutan the second fastest growing economy in the world.

We have also resolved the rupee problem and have taken immediate measures to not only open bank loans but also, with support of Royal Monetary Authority, reduced interest rates on loans. And within the last few years, we have built a substantial amount of rupee and USD reserve and have cleared most rupee loans that were availed for short-term consumption. While non-hydropower debts have gone down substantially, the total national debt went up due to several ongoing hydropower projects. To ensure future governments maintain national debt within responsible limit, we have put in place a public debt policy, which does not allow the government to have more than 35 percent of the total debt as non-hydropower debt. While hydropower debts are self-liquidating soft loans, we must be careful of the non-hydropower debts.

With special focus on rural development, we have reduced poverty and improved the lives of people in every remote corner of the country. At the same time, we have also invested a lot in developing our thromdes. Some of the major projects we have undertaken outside the 11FYP include widening east-west highway, establishment of central schools, and collateral free special loans from Rural Enterprise Development Corporation Limited for our farmers and unemployed youth, and a special housing project in Phuntsholing for thousands of our people living across the border.

In order to encourage tourism in eastern Bhutan, for the next three years, we have waived off the royalty for international tourists visiting the east. And the helicopters are saving precious lives and properties on a daily basis. We have also made substantial investment in creating employment opportunities, including overseas employment, and skills training and entrepreneurship development programmes. And today, as reported to the National Assembly at its last session, we have more jobs than registered job seekers. We have also made meaningful progress in other sectors like the healthcare, disaster management and foreign relations. Among others, we have doubled the capital fund of Bhutan Health Trust Fund and have improved relation with our neighbours including the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam.

Priorities

In the next five years and beyond, we'll continue to invest in rural development to end poverty and make our villages economically vibrant and prosperous. We will also continue to invest and empower our thromdes to make life in our cities safe, comfortable, healthy, and enjoyable. Our other important priorities will continue to be: Economy, Education, and Employment.

When the economy gets into trouble, it affects everybody: the rich, poor, shop-keepers, traders, contractors, industrialists, property owners, civil servants, farmers, and students. Through *Waangtse Chhirpel*, we'll build a strong and broad-based foundation for our economy. We'll continue to empower our entrepreneurs and private sector to make them the real engine of economic growth and job creation. We will continue to build infrastructure and create opportunities for entrepreneurship in agriculture and renewable natural resources, tourism, ICT, arts and crafts, and other knowledge-based industries.

The long-term future of our nation depends on the quality of education we provide to our children. Under our compassionate King, we'll ensure that education and healthcare remains free for all time—and we'll continue to focus on improving the quality. We'll continue to empower our teachers,

educationists, doctors, and health workers. We already see a lot of improvement in the quality of education with the establishment of 60 central schools, and we will establish 60 more. With 120 central schools, we'll be able to provide admission to every child who wishes to study in a central school. We will work hard to ensure every Bhutanese child receives the best possible education. We'll also work hard to ensure all our people receive high quality healthcare services. And we'll continue to raise funds for Bhutan Health Trust Fund to make sure that no Bhutanese will ever have to pay for their healthcare services and medicines.

We'll continue to do everything possible to make sure that every person looking for a job gets one. We'll continue to provide skills development trainings and effective employment programmes and initiatives. We'll also continue to invest a lot more on entrepreneurship programmes for self-employment. In the long run, we would like the private sector to be the main engine of job creation. We also believe that, in the long run, our efforts in improving the quality of education and investment in vocational and technical training programmes will help our people compete and find meaningful jobs, not only within the country but also in the global job market.

Through our efforts in the above areas, together with other direct and indirect measures, we will deal with the existing and emerging social problems, especially those related to our youth.

Policies

Our polices will be guided by the principles of GNH, *Waangtse Chhirpel* and the Middle Path. We'll continue to build a society that is fair, just and equitable. We'll continue to pursue policies of socio-economic development that are inclusive, regionally balanced and sustainable. And our economic development policy will have special focus on developing a socially, culturally and environmentally responsible private sector.

In line with *Waangtse Chhirpel*, we'll continue to empower our local governments and local leaders. We'll also continue to empower our civil servants and build an effective system of meritocracy that recognises and rewards individuals and organisations, based on their actual performance.

Our policies will continue to empower our youth and women. We'll continue to fight corruption, and be always respectful and supportive of all important institutions of democracy, including the media and judiciary. And we will continue to strengthen our relationship with all our neighbours.

Strength

Our strength lies in our past achievements, both as the opposition and government. Our strength lies in our vision and aspirations for Bhutan's future—and our commitment to make that future possible. Our strength lies in our values and beliefs. Our strength lies in our ideology of *Waangtse Chhirpel* that focuses on empowering our people and institutions. Our strength lies in our hard work and commitment to serve *Tsa-wa-Sum* (king, nation and people) with utmost loyalty and *Tha Damtse*. Our strength lies in the trust we have gained as a responsible party that delivers on its promises, and our intolerance and commitment to fight corruption. Our strength lies in being the government of all people—for not causing division within our small society. Our strength lies in the proven leadership of our president and other leaders. Our strength lies in our party organisation with established presence and grassroots network in every 20 dzongkhags and 205 gewogs. And our strength lies in a group of highly qualified and experienced candidates joining us for the upcoming elections.

Under the enlightened leadership and guidance of our King, we have a rare opportunity to make Bhutan a great nation and home-grow a democracy that truly benefits all our people. Whether it remains an unfulfilled dream or becomes a reality will largely depend on the government and leaders we elect. We need to elect a government and leaders who can clearly see Bhutan's promising future and follow the vision of our great King. We need to elect a government and leaders who can make us proud, both within and outside the country.

When we reflect on our past, we find joy and happiness in the fact that we have served our *Tsa-wa-Sum* well—both as the opposition and serving government. And we look into the future with hope and optimism that our people will keep *Tha Damtse*, put the interest of our nation first, and elect a government and leaders who can best serve our *Tsa-wa-Sum*, from day one. We remain hopeful that in the forthcoming elections, we will be given the privilege and honour to serve another term.

Contributors

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Kesang Dema worked as a print journalist with the national newspaper, Kuensel, for almost a decade. Before resigning, she was the political correspondent of the paper, and covered politics, parliament, and elections. Today, she runs a firm called Dhensel Research and Consulting, that offers media related services and consultancy. Kesang Dema has a Masters in Journalism from University of Technology Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

Kinley is a deputy chief budget officer with Ministry of Finance. He worked as an electoral training manager with Election Commission of Bhutan for 10 years before joining the finance ministry. He was instrumental in the institution of democracy clubs in Bhutan. Kinley completed his undergraduate from Sherubtse College with Major in Business and has Master degree in International and Development Economics from Australian National University.

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Tashi Dema is the Chief of Bureau in Kuensel, Bhutan's national newspaper. Over the last 11 years, has reported from some of the remote communities of Bhutan. Her – stories "The Night Hunting" and "Girl Missing for 8 Years Reunited With Family" won her awards for the best feature and best story for women and children, respectively.

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