

# Bhutan's Unique Transition to Democracy and its Challenges\*



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## Abstract

There was neither external pressure for democracy in Bhutan nor its subjects demanded for it. Further, there was no attempted coup by dictators and military juntas as some of the countries in the world had experienced. The development of Bhutanese democracy was truly special and only one of its kind as it was purely an initiative of the reigning monarchs of Bhutan with devolution and decentralization of power to the citizens by His Majesty the Fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck over the course of time. It was a fruit of great efforts and sacrifices, put in by the reigning monarchs for the past several decades for the smooth transition to parliamentary democracy. The democracy was a great gift from the throne. Bhutan became the world's newest and youngest democracy in the spring of 2008. The first-ever multi-party election ended over a century of monarchical rule. Transitions to democracy are often violent and associated with terrible bloodshed elsewhere but Bhutan's unique way of peaceful transition and in a stable manner makes it incredibly special, drawing an attention of the world. Despite successful transition to democracy, it is never free of challenges and limitations. There are some constraints that require special attention for flourishing vibrant democracy.

**Keywords:** Monarchy; Devolution; Decentralization; Transition; Democracy

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## Introduction

The Kingdom of Bhutan is a tiny developing Himalayan country in South Asia with a population of a little more than half million. It is one of the Asia's smallest nations, land-locked between the world's largest democracy, India to the South and the powerful emergent economy of China to the North respectively. Bhutan remained isolated from rest of the world for centuries as a sovereign state, largely untouched owing to its geographical location (Sherpa, n.d). Unlike other countries of South Asia, (Chuki, 2015) it never experienced British colonial aggression and remained a sovereign state.

However, the country faced several external threats from Tibet and fought a war for five times during the reign of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (a Tibetan Buddhist priest: 1594-1651), the unifier of Bhutan as a nation-state (arrived in Bhutan: 1616), the last ending in victory for Bhutan (Ardussi, 2004). On the other hand, there was unending civil strife for over 250 years among the Dzongpons, Penlops (governors of the fortress), and Chieftains (local leaders) of different regions trying to establish their power and supremacy over the other regions. The people were completely exhausted with the internal problem and desperately desired for peace and stability. Thus, the people quitted their power and handed over to Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck to establish a monarch. Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck was unanimously enthroned as the first hereditary King of Bhutan on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1907 by the people at Pungthang Dewa Chenpoi Phodrang (palace of great bliss and happiness – an old capital of Bhutan and the present day known as Punakha), with the signing of Gyenja (An agreement) (Mathou, 2000). The centuries of internal turmoil was culminated by bringing the different governors and Chieftains under his control, establishing much-needed stability and peace in the country (Wolf, 2016). Since then, the Bhutanese people live in complete bliss enjoying the unprecedented peace, stability, and progress under successive monarchs of the Wangchuck dynasty.

Indeed, there was neither external pressure for democracy in Bhutan nor the subjects demanded for it. There was no attempted coup by dictators and military juntas as some Asian countries like Burma, Indonesia, Nepal, Thailand, etc had experienced. Wolf (2016) claimed that the development of Bhutanese democracy was purely an initiative of reigning monarchs of Bhutan and took several decades for its actual realization. His Majesty the King Jigme Singye Wangchuck decided to end his reign by ushering democracy to

Bhutan, envisioning that it would be the best form of government to involve the people for development and sustainability (Phuntsho, 2008). Although, there was strong resistance from the people that they did not want a new form of government, however, His Majesty the King traveled around the country and discussed with the subjects about it and ushered democracy.

Bhutan became the world's newest and youngest democracy in the spring of 2008. The first-ever multi-party election ended over a century of monarchical rule. Transitions to democracy are often violent and associated with terrible bloodshed elsewhere but Bhutan's unique way of peaceful transition and in a stable manner makes it incredibly special, drawing an attention of the world (Ahmed, 2013). Nonetheless, the government needs to focus on numerous issues for redressing such as deprivation of religious figures from participating in the electoral process, aspirant candidates to have a minimum qualification of the university degree, fewer female representatives, the press freedom, falling the things apart, and Nepal refugee problem to ensure healthy and vibrant democracy.

## Steady and gradual devolution of Power and Democratization

There are several theories regarding democratic transitions. However, in this paper, I will be focusing on Samuel P. Huntington's theory of "transformation" from his book titled *The Third Wave* to explain the democratic transitions in Bhutan. Huntington (1991) offers his theory of democratic transition in the book by explaining the three types of traditional democratic transitions from authoritarian regimes; transformations, replacements, and transplacements. A transformation occurs when the democratic transition is initiated "from above" by those in power. Furthermore, a replacement is a process of overthrowing the current government by the opposition. A transplacement occurs when there is a compromise between those in the government and the opposition, and both parties agree to democratize.

The type of transition that has taken place in Bhutan is a transformation. Huntington (1991) stated that it is when "those in power in the authoritarian regime take

the lead and play the decisive role in ending the regime and changes into a democratic system. The process of democratization in Bhutan was gradual and exceptional in several manners from rest of the countries in the world. The development of Bhutanese democracy has been marked by a great initiative and active encouragement of monarchs. The journey of democracy in Bhutan originated from the golden throne and not as a result of the outcry of unhappy subjects. Unlike other countries in the world, Bhutan has transitioned peacefully and smoothly from an absolute monarchy to a multi-party democracy without any crisis. Thus, most of the Bhutanese firmly believe and say “It is a precious gift from the golden throne” (Phuntsho, 2008). The development of Bhutanese democracy was well planned by reigning monarchs and took several decades for its actual realization of parliamentary democracy in spring 2008. It will be unjustifiable to directly delve into the challenges of the democracy in Bhutan without flashing on chain of events of democratization. Although in nutshell, the subsequent paragraphs will unfold the gradual and atypical process of democratization in chronological order commencing from 1953 to the present day of modern Bhutan.

Bhutan has been ruled by the successive kings since 1907 and remained independent and largely immune to development until about fifty years ago. The first roads and schools were built in 1960 and began to embrace modernization slowly and the process of modernization brought swift socio-economic advance (Mathou, 2000). With the establishment of the first Tshogdu (National Assembly) of Bhutan in 1953 in Punakha by His Majesty the Third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, the seed of democracy was sown then. Initially, there were 36 members - five representatives from dratshang (Monastic Body), 16 nominated government officials, and 15 representatives of the people (National Assembly of Bhutan, n.d.). It was established so that the representatives of the people shall assemble to articulate the issues of the people and provide solutions to their problems, to come up with plans and ideas to benefit the development of the kingdom and strengthen it, and to record accounts of revenues in the Kingdom as well as annual expenditure incurred for the government and for development purposes. The number of National Assembly members increased over the years and there were 150 elected representatives of the people; 6 Royal Advisory Councilors, 35 nominated representatives from the government, and 10 from the clergy. This system is to ensure a democratic governance of the country. The National Assembly of Bhutan was the unicameral

Parliament of Bhutan. Bhutan got its bicameral Parliament (National Council and National Assembly) with the recent introduction of Parliamentary democracy (National Assembly of Bhutan, n.d.). It is the highest decision-making body in the country.

His Majesty reserved the right to amend all its decisions as per the 1954 constitution of the National Assembly. However, it was decided in 1968 that the decisions of the National Assembly would be final and binding. If His Majesty had misgivings about the soundness of the Assembly's decisions, he would address the Assembly to propose to reconsider the decisions but His Majesty would not be permitted to amend them. His Majesty the King proposed to make the National Assembly a sovereign institution and the Assembly members endorsed it. Wolf (2016) stated that for strengthening the National Assembly as a supreme body, His Majesty introduced the vote of no confidence in monarchy despite the Assembly's outright rejection in three consecutive sessions. In addition, the introduction of a vote of no confidence in the Monarchy meant the King surrendering his veto power and vesting all the legislative power in the National Assembly. Exactly after 100 years of progressive monarchical rule, the National Assembly was formally dissolved in 2007 with Bhutan's historic transition to parliamentary democracy in 2008. Further, in 1963, the Lodee Tshogde (Royal Advisory Council) was established to advise the King and the council of ministers on important issues of the nation and to ensure that projects were implemented successfully. The Royal Advisory Council also acted as a bridge between the king, council of ministers and the people, which was another significant step towards democratization.

His Majesty the fourth King was enthroned as the king on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1972 and traveled extensively ever since the enthronement and met with the subjects. The development philosophy of Gross National Happiness was propounded by the King in 1970s and all the development policies are being carried out in accordance with the concept to ensure the spiritual well-being of the citizens (Wolf, 2016). The developmental activities were carried out based on collective decisions, considering the people's needs and views. The much-loved and revered fourth king started a process of gradual decentralization and devolution of the administrative power to the districts and sub-district levels by instituting the Dzongkhag Yargay Tshogdu (District Development Assembly) in 1981 (Wolf, 2016). The process of decentralization with administrative and fiscal delegation

to districts and sub-districts was started to facilitate local participation in economic planning. The fourth King has also decentralized and devolved administrative power to the Gewogs (blocks) in 1991 by enacting the first Geog Yargay Tshogchung (Block Development Committee) as a framework for local administration, which was another important move towards decentralization. The blocks are official administrative units, headed by a Gup (village headman).

In 1998, His Majesty the Fourth King empowered the National Assembly to elect the council of ministers who would be entrusted with the responsibility to take care of the governance affairs of the country (Wolf, 2016). The Assembly was also empowered to develop a mechanism for registering a vote of no confidence in King. The prime minister and ministers were elected by the members of the national assembly. The long-standing cabinets were dissolved and transferred full executive power to the newly elected cabinet. The devolution of the power of the King to the cabinet ministers in 1998 was the highest degree of decentralization. Hence, the King began to serve as the Head of the State, thereafter, while the government has been managed by the Prime Minister (Wolf, 2016; Barahona, 2016).

The Election Commission of Bhutan conducted extensive voter education program on the electoral process throughout the country and the mock election was conducted successfully on 21<sup>st</sup> April 2007 to familiarize the people with the democratic process. There were four fictional parties namely Druk Yellow, Druk Red, Druk Blue, and Druk Green with different manifestos and ideologies (Druk is the Dzongkha word for the thunder dragon, the country's national symbol). The majority of the people voted for Druk Yellow and Druk Red parties during the primary round. The general round of the election was held on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2007 between the two leading parties and the Druk Yellow Party secured 46 seats in the 47 constituencies (Ahmed, 2013).

The National Council election was conducted on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2007 in fifteen districts and elected its first National Council (the upper house) of the new bicameral Parliament of Bhutan. However, the elections could not be held in the remaining five districts namely Gasa, Haa, Lhuntse, Thimphu, and Trashiyangtse on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2007 owing to a single candidate till the last date for filing the nominations. The elections in

these five districts were held on 29<sup>th</sup> January 2008. The National Council of Bhutan comprised 25 members including five eminent members nominated by the King of Bhutan, in addition to 20 members, who were directly elected from 20 districts.

The two parties namely Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT - the Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) were registered by the Election Commission of Bhutan to contest the election. The first election was held on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2008 for the National Assembly (lower house). The Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party secured 45 seats, with the People's Democratic Party winning only two seats (Adhikari, 2012). The first democratic local elections were scheduled initially for 2008 but were delayed until 2011. Local elections for districts, blocks, and thromdey (municipality) governments were conducted on different schedules between January and August 2011. The voter participation was comparatively lower than in the previous 80%.

The DPT formed the first democratically elected government and PDP as an opposition party. Upon completion of its five year tenure, the DPT government was dissolved on 20<sup>th</sup> April 2013. Initially, there were five parties registered for the elections namely Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT), People's Democratic party (PDP), Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT), Druk Chirwang Tshogpa (DCT), and Druk Kuenam Party. However, only four parties contested the primary round as one party (Druk Kuenam Party) did not fulfill the criteria of furnishing a list of all 47 candidates to the Election Commission of Bhutan. In May 2013, four parties contested the primary round, in which the ruling DPT won 44.52 percent of the votes against the PDP's 32.53 percent. Only the two leading parties in the primary elections contested the second (general) round of elections to the National Assembly. The 2013 election was the second election in the history of parliamentary democracy in Bhutan and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) won an absolute majority, securing 32 of 47 seats in the National Assembly. Although, the DPT was leading during the primary round but secured only 15 seats in the general round of election. On 28<sup>th</sup> July, the new government, which comprised the first-ever woman minister in Bhutan, was formed by PDP, with Mr. Tshering Tobgay as the Prime Minister and DPT as an opposition party. Parliamentary elections for the National Council took place in April 2013. The 2013 elections were declared as being free and fair by international election observers.

## Challenges

It was evident that the process of democratization was peaceful and smooth, which was credited by the international election observers. However, it is not free of challenges. There are several limitations but will focus on some of the deserving issues such as deprivation of religious figures from participating in the electoral process, aspirant candidates to have a minimum qualification of the university degree, less female representatives, the press freedom, falling the things apart, and Nepal refugee problem that need to be given top priority and reviewed for ensuring vibrant democracy.

### Deprivation of religious figures from participating in the electoral process

Phuntsho (2008) stated that there are approximately 70,000 monks, nuns, and lay priests in the country and they are deprived from franchising the right to vote. Furthermore, a large number of lay priests in the eastern part of Bhutan are practicing religion and farming simultaneously. In general, 10% of the potential voting body, comprising of religious figures are barred from participating in electoral process as the Election Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan (2008) mandates that religion and religious figures are to remain “above politics”. The Chief Election Commissioner of Bhutan reasoned, “To cast a vote, one has to choose the party; one has to discriminate by doing so” (Phuntsho, 2008). Buddhist monks must transcend worldly discrimination and partiality. The exclusion of them from participating in the electoral process has not only lessened people’s participation in democracy but led to other issues. Some monks have renounced their religious status to franchise their rights to vote and some are in dilemma as to whether they should renounce their religious status to claim their franchise. There is a general feeling among them that they will not be represented qualitatively by the political parties. There is a perceived risk of younger generations neglecting spiritual tradition in the future.

## Aspirant candidates should be a university graduate

It is mandatory that all the aspirant candidates of the parliamentary should have a minimum qualification of the university degree from credible institutes to conduct modern political and economic discourse effectively (The Election Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2008). It is also reasoned to ensure better interaction with international counterparts and a university education is considered as an essential criterion for good leadership. Phuntsho (2008) opined that most of the community leaders have a traditional upbringing but do not have modern education as it began in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and such a criterion is a great hindrance for them. In addition, the qualification criteria have barred many of the former representatives and community leaders from participating in the race and true democracy may remain forever out of their reach. On the other hand, there is an acute shortage of political aspirants and only two parties were successfully formed in 2008, despite repeated calls to set up political parties. It was difficult for a couple of districts to produce two candidates and most of the candidates who competed in December 2007 for the twenty seats in the national council or the upper house were in their 30s, and some of them were fresh graduates and inexperienced. Bhutan will continue to have a shortage of candidates and less party unless the present criteria are amended.

## Fewer women representatives in the parliament and local government

The women of Bhutan have been traditionally entrusted with the responsibilities of running the households and their role in the public sphere has been negligible. Bhutan has undergone vital changes since the introduction of democracy in 2008, providing women with an opportunity to move out of their traditional sphere of work and participate in the public and political arena, which otherwise is dominated by men (Chuki, 2015). The important challenge for the young democracy in Bhutan is the lack of the political participation and representation of women as only a few of them were elected as members of the parliament, a trend no better than other South Asian Countries. Nevertheless, they have made their presence felt in a masculine environment by

demonstrating principled, feminine, political leadership. In fact, they have greatly motivated the young literate women, who aspire to be a member of parliament.

The insignificant numbers of women representatives in the National Assembly and National Council for a democratic country with around 48% of women population are absurd. Both houses are dominated by men and the Cabinet is also male dominated but recently one female minister has been elected. The situation is no better in local government, which is mainly dominated by men. There were only handful of women parliamentarians (ten and six representatives in parliament in 2008 and 2013 respectively) and one woman leader (Village leader) of the 205 village leaders on a local level in 2013 local election. The overall result of the 2013 elections was disappointing when it comes to the representation of women. This unhealthy trend should not continue and Bhutanese politics must encourage women's participation to be in the cabinet, ruling party, the opposition party, National Council, and local government for strengthening democracy and enhancing good governance. It is an indication that there is a need to understand and get a better insight of the issues facing women in politics and find an alternative to bridge the gap. The women leaders will represent around 48% of the population and present the needs and issues of women and children qualitatively different from men.

## The Press Freedom

The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan (2008) guarantees the right to free speech, opinion, and expression realizing that the press has a significant role to play in the democratic nation as the watch dog. Freedom House (2015) claimed that at one point of time, Bhutan had been 12 newspapers, six radio stations, one online newspaper, and a number of magazines based in Thimphu, the capital. Mishra (2008) stated that the media outlets are dependent on advertising revenue distributed by state bodies for their survival and the media companies have been performing fantastic jobs for several years covering various issues ranging from societal problems to stories that are critical of the government. However, Bhutan's fragile economic climate continues to pose a challenge for private media companies and the number dwindled over the past years, compelling some media companies to close down recently due to the financial crisis.

As per the findings of the France-based international non-governmental organization, Reporters Without Borders (RWB), Bhutan's press freedom index ranking was at 157 in 2003. Over the years, there has been dramatic improvement following the adoption of the Constitution to other reforms and placed Bhutan at 70. Recently, Bhutan's ranking has rapidly dropped in the last three years in a row by a record 12 places and placed 82, which has become a matter of concern for everyone. Some critics argue that it could be due to the government's increasing intolerant of criticisms, penalizing newspapers by not giving them government advertisements, intimidated or threatened by several players and situations, inaccessible to information, lack of proper legislation such as the Right to Information Act, etc (Dorji, 2013).

However, some are of the opinion that the difference in the ranking could be because of the changes in certain indicators compared to the past years, rapid media progress in other countries while in Bhutan, it may have remained constant in comparison and it is important to know if Bhutanese media is at the same level as others. Irrespective of all these reasons, Bhutan should make a serious note of it and reflect where we have gone wrong in the management of the media and related issues and strive to promote and ensure greater press freedom as soon as possible (Dorji, 2013). It is important to raise the standards of press freedom urgently for fair coverage of the activities in the country and to ensure full public accountability and national integrity. The government must continue to support the growth of media for ensuring vibrant democracy.

## **Falling the things apart**

Solidarity has been always strong in Bhutanese society unlike in the western countries. However, the change is creeping in close-knit Bhutanese society with modernization and development. The evils of modernization have already seeped into its society and the younger generations are greatly influenced by western fashion either through media or studying in abroad (Phuntsho, 2008). Furthermore, the society is experiencing divide between rural and urban societies, have and have-nots, the younger and older generations, men and women. Discotheques, karaoke, and bars have been mushrooming in urban areas and the crimes (drug abuse, thefts, and desecration of chorten - stupas) are increasing, although not at an alarming rate. The people are more

inclined towards materialistic and indulging in unscrupulous acts (smuggling of religious antiques), which is a direct challenge to traditional values. The influence of religion is eroding especially among the younger generations and the intra-family solidarity is declining between urban and rural communities. The traditional values have adapted quite well in some cases and in some other cases they have been suffering from modernization. The majority of the older generations are worried that traditional values will become difficult in the long run and will be at stake. With modernization and democratization, friends and family were fallen apart along political lines while enemies have united under one political party in the villages (Phuntscho, 2008). In order to flourish healthy democracy, a cordial and healthy relationship is critical among different sections of people.

## Nepal Refugee problem

Bhutan has three main ethnic groups namely Sharchop of the east, Ngalong from the west are Buddhist and the Lhotsampas of the south are ethnic Nepalese, mostly Hindus and small portion are Christian, who have migrated from Nepal to Bhutan. According to historical records of British Officials Charles Bell and John Claude White, the first time Nepalese were spotted in Bhutan was around 1904 and 1905. They were initially brought into southern Bhutan legally as laborers, known as ‘Tangyas’ and were granted citizenship by an Act of the National Assembly in 1958, considering them genuine citizens of Bhutan. However, many illegal immigrants entered into Bhutan through the porous international border until as late as the early 1980s. Any immigrant who seeped into Bhutan after this date was to be considered as illegal and sent back to their original place – Nepal. However, they have been staying in a refugee camp, the eastern part of Nepal, identifying themselves as Bhutanese refugees. The Royal Government of Bhutan has had several rounds of negotiation with the Government of Nepal and acknowledged that there are some citizens of Bhutan in the camp, who would be repatriated to Bhutan after joint verification.

The evolution of parliamentary democracy from absolute monarchy in Bhutan has been a unique and smooth transition to democratization (Wolf, 2016). Undoubtedly, the credit goes to King for the great initiatives. Unlike a despotic king of Nepal, who clung to power up to the last minute, the situation is reversed in Bhutan. However, the Nepalese

ethnics in the camp were skeptical about the royal intention and the eventual outcome of the current process of democratization in Bhutan. In spite of, the apprehension and misgivings about democracy, the King ushered democracy in 2008. The introduction of democracy has been viewed by them as favorable circumstances for negotiating the refugee problem though it will not be a remedy for all. Bhutan has already made considerable efforts in the bilateral negotiations but could not reach to ultimate solutions owing to numerous problems. Although, most of them are resettled in third countries but there are some refugees in the camp, expecting for repatriation to Bhutan. Frelick (2008) argue that if Bhutan aspires to be truly democratic, it should choose a path of reconciliation with the disenfranchised ethnic Nepalese inside and outside its borders. It may strengthen the hand of the militants and discover that simply holding elections will bring neither real democracy nor peace instead if it deliberately excludes many of its people.

## **Conclusion:**

Bhutan has slowly emerged from isolation and embraced development in the 1960s, experiencing fast socio-economic growth ever since. Bhutan's distinct and incredibly peaceful transition to democracy in 2008 could draw the attention of the world and has been bestowed with the huge responsibility of ensuring vibrant democracy at all times to come. Besides, Bhutan has been increasingly gaining popularity in the international sphere due to its unique development philosophy of "Gross National Happiness", propounded by His Majesty the Fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuk in 1970s. Despite its tiny size and a population of over half million, Bhutan takes pride in doing the things uniquely from rest of the countries in the world.

On the other hand, some critics argue that the recent transition to democracy is a means to silence political dissent and to secure the monarchy's future as the constitution gives great significance to the king and preserves most royal privileges (Phuntsho, 2008). However, most of the Bhutanese see the royal initiative to democratize as timely. It is also viewed by some Bhutanese that the King's decision to initiate political change must be acknowledged with the inevitable intrusion of modern technology and

recognizing that time is changing. The time for Bhutan's political transition was deliberately chosen as Bhutan cannot remain isolated forever.

Irrespective of all these assumptions, it is critical to understand that no system is free of flaws and weaknesses. Bhutan is no exception and has its own share of challenges ranging from deprivation of religious figures from participating in the electoral process to Nepali refugee problem that need to be redressed. Bhutan should make note of these issues seriously and reflect upon as to how these can be tackled effectively to ensure mass participation representing people from all walks of life and maintaining cordial and healthy relationship among them. Further, it is important to raise the standards of press freedom urgently for fair coverage of the activities in the country and to ensure full public accountability and national integrity for flourishing healthy democracy. Addressing the prevailing issues will enable to take forward the legacy of the philosophy of Gross National Happiness and ensure to flourish healthy and vibrant democracy.

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