

Caroline Schiavo  
Professor Ghazia Aslam  
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## Passing the Bhutan from a Monarchy to a Democracy

### **Introduction**

The government of Bhutan has evolved from a pure monarchy to a guided democracy, along with all the trappings of a developing country. The first elections of a democratic society began in 2008 and 2013 with the guidance of "...His Majesty sitting through the sessions of the Tshogdu on a high gilded throne, taking notes and even occasionally intervening in the debate..." (Mukherjee, 2012). This reveals that the monarchy is concerned about guiding the adoption and direction of democracy in the country. "The command of His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck to draft a written constitution for the kingdom, the following consultations by the monarch with the subjects, the latter's reluctance and the gentle force behind them, all but point to the fact that the monarch's role in setting up a democratic model in the country" (Mukherjee, 2012). This identifies that the kingdom documented a clear hierarchical path to democracy with a dedication to providing stability to the Bhutanese citizens; the challenge was twofold to actively and simultaneously preserve the traditional system and values, while adapting to modernity and its uneasiness. "The main challenges are also described in order to assess the viability of the monarchy as the principal agent of change" (Mathou, 2009). The Bhutanese government has been marked by political, historical, and cultural aspects. The portrait of Bhutan can be considered based on: its geography, its democratization, its governmental structure, its Gross National Happiness factor, and its educational challenges and goals.

### **The Geography and Disputed Territory of the Kingdom of Bhutan**

The struggle of geography between the Kingdom of Bhutan and its neighboring countries has been an ongoing struggle since the 1960s, resulting in the clash of disputed territory of the Sino-Bhutanese boundary. Under the 1910 Treaty of Punakha, Bhutan allowed Britain to control its external relations and be a buffer state between India and China. In 1947, this authority died

as India gained independence and attempted to gain control over the region by asserting a new treaty that guaranteed them sole autonomy. While the Kingdom of Bhutan joined the United Nations in 1971, India felt Bhutan was “‘obligated’ to follow its advice, whereas the government in Thimphu [Bhutan’s capital city] maintained that it needed only to ‘seek and consider’ India’s guidance” (Hyer, 2015, p. 98). With the Bhutan government’s recent change from a monarchy to constitutional democracy, India and Bhutan have signed friendship accords that eliminate the overstep of foreign relations. Furthermore, Bhutan claimed China’s ownership of the Chumbi Valley area and parts of the Sikkim included the building of roads and military intervention in the disputed territory was concerning and aggressive. China’s main goal was to reinstate Bhutan as buffer state by cutting their friendship ties with India by redistricting Bhutan’s maps in their favor (Hyer, 2015, p. 101). During the 1960s outbreak of war between China and India, Bhutan became a ceasefire state. King Wangchuk and Bhutanese Foreign Minister Tsering started to acknowledge that the border territory has “always been peaceful” (Hyer, 2015, p. 102). After over fourteen rounds of negotiation, the boundary conflict has never been resolved which can be attributed to India’s overreach of Bhutan’s foreign policy and China’s efforts of a package deal to let Bhutan claim the north central territory in exchange for their rule of the trade route area on the western side.

### **Modernization versus Voluntarist Theory**

Typically, modernization theory is spawned through economic development incentive which forces people to become more supportive of a democracy, while the voluntarist school of thought is a better model for Bhutanese transition. The voluntarist theory gives credit to human behavior and relies on external motivations and constraints focusing on a micro-level approach associated with diplomatic leadership and specific social circles (Sinpeng, 2007, p. 26). According to Michael L. Ross’ “Does Oil Hinder Democracy?”, since modernization tends to be a social and cultural movement, the exportation of oil and natural resources fails democratic principles. This so called “modernization effect” is another mechanism of oil “including occupational specialization, urbanization, and higher levels of education” which supports socio-economic positions and resource wealth (Ross, 2001, p. 336). As a country in Central Asia, the Kingdom of Bhutan can attribute its rise in population and economic

development to its transition to a democratic regime which inherently implies a structuralist argument or macro-level viewpoint. Although, significant economic growth could unintentionally create an authoritarian regime such as the monarchical type which Bhutan withdrew from, modernization efforts seek to eliminate that possibility (Sinpeng, 2007, p. 21-24). This economic development has not applied to Bhutan's transition which has surprisingly been peaceful and stable. These principles have unaffected Bhutan's new democracy, but rather the factors of democracy originated from:

#### 1) Economic Advancement with Minimalist Industrialization

The middle class tends to control the wealth of Bhutanese society; social class levels have therefore sustained. The key was to ensure Bhutan was not "Westernising" which can be attributed to the lack of technological and manufacturing industries and high employment in rural agriculture production areas until the 21<sup>st</sup> Century including limited radio, television, and internet access (Sinpeng, 2007, p. 29). Since the public-sector controls much of the wealth and industrialization process, introducing Bhutan's hydroelectric plant, the private sector and people's will has become very scarce.

#### 2) Growing Wealth Disparities with a Low Level of Class Struggle

These disparities are associated with sustainable development plans. The universal definition from the Brundtland Report Commission, *Our Common Future*, states, "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" dealing primarily with the concepts of needs and limitations (United Nations, 1987). While the Kingdom of Bhutan's agricultural policies allow for basic needs to be met because every citizen is freely entitled to farming land, wealth redistribution should be higher than average, but geographic discrepancies deem this impossible. Bhutan's government relies on non-tax revenue, where local officials are able to spend one quarter of the national budget without national approval due to Bhutanese society's self-sufficiency and positive attitudes towards the poor (Sinpeng, 2007, p. 31).

### 3) Relatively High Ratio of Uneducated Citizenry

As witnessed, the Kingdom of Bhutan defies the typical stereotypes associated with a democracy. Since most of the population is illiterate, officials were sent out to different parts of the country to educate citizens on the process of casting a vote and understanding rather than being forced into the 'unknown' concept of democracy. Economic development may have increased, but education and infrastructure are stagnant which demonstrates a lack of social class tension proving that the modernization theory cannot apply to Bhutan's political transition (Sinpeng, 2007, p 34).

### 4) Relatively Isolated Country with Minimalist Outside Interference

The Kingdom of Bhutan had intense polarization to protect the Buddhist Kingdom and unite Himalayan groups by forming its monarchy and maintaining "its sovereignty...to establish itself [monarchy] as the only legitimate institute" (Sinpeng, 2007, p. 35). In Samuel P. Huntington's "Democracy's Third Wave", he explains how changes in external relationships establish a democratic regime. Examples have included the European Community's role in strengthening southern Europe democratic policies such as Turkey's membership and America's post-Cold War democracy initiative which may be limited due to budget, trade, and foreign affairs influence and incur less influence in Third World nations (Huntington, 1991, p. 14).

It is essential to Bhutan's future to consider Huntington's argument which warns his scholarly readers that, "If people around the world come to see the United States as a fading power beset by political stagnation, economic inefficiency, and social chaos, its perceived failures will inevitably be seen as the failures of democracy, and the worldwide appeal of democracy will diminish"; for Bhutan, this contagion effect could set them back to their authoritarian monarchical rule of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Huntington, 1991, p. 15). Although in Bhutan's case, the contagion could be from India's control over their foreign policies, China's manipulation of the disputed territory, or other surrounding Central Asia states grievances. Likewise, the abdication of King Wangchuck of Bhutan was met with sadness and surprise by the elites who favored his policies whereas Nepal's preceding monarchy led by King Gyanendra was protested upon by all citizens (Sinpeng, 2007, p. 36).

## **Government Organization: Executive, Legislature, Local Administration, Judiciary**

The creation of the National Assembly was associated with two other branches of government, the Advisory Council and the Central Secretariat, as well as the administration of the local villages and the judiciary and armed forces of the Kingdom of Bhutan. The king's role is to administer policies through the Tshogdu National Assembly and the Executive Royal Advisory Council who governs the daily operations (Singh, 1972, p. 98). The Council of Ministers, the Royal Council, and the Central Secretariat comprise the executive arch under the King of Bhutan and state politics machinery. The Royal Council includes five representatives for the citizens, two individuals from the monasteries, and a Chairman appointed by the government. By establishing the Royal Council, the Bhutanese created a Council of Elders, establishing a correspondence to a 'modern parliamentary democracy'. While this Council was not equal to the cabinet of Ministers at its establishment it evolved overtime because representatives were also participating members of the Tshogdu National Assembly. The Council of Ministers, created in 1999 is the highest executive branch in Bhutan; it consists of heads of governments as appointed by the King and with the advice of the Royal Advisory council to include: the Home Minister, the Finance Minister, the Minister of Trade, Commerce & Industries, and the Minister for Development and Department of External Affairs. The Central Secretariat is the government machinery that oversees the administrative gaps of the government such as the various districts and controlling the lower levels of government (Singh, 1972, p. 100). The Tshogdu National Assembly originated from the concept of meeting that included higher interests and bigger political crowds which was established by the 3rd King, commonly referred to as the Druk Gyalpo or the head of state. This stands as a model to represent "the people, the monks, and the officials, to advise the Government on all matters of national importance" comprising of representation by these three bodies (Singh, 1972, p. 101). The people are indirectly elected for a three year by the consensus of the villagers and the populations of each village's district, demonstrating the concept of proportional representation. The monks are nominated by the monasteries and the latter, the officials are nominated by the current King and overlap with other government bodies such as the Council of Ministers, the Royal Advisory Council, the National Assembly, judges, or other civil servants. The Tshogdu National Assembly powers include passing laws of civil and criminal nature, approving the King's appointments,

and advising on national issues representing parliamentary purposes, as well as legislative (Singh, 1972, p. 103). Laws passed by the Tshogdu National Assembly are subject to veto by the King, but the principals behind the passage of law have evolved to only need the vote of a simple majority over any policy His Majesty deems ineffective. The first outcome of this principle was the Supreme Law of 1959. Similarly, appointees for any branch must be approved by the majority included by the Drangpon judges. The judiciary branch was established in 1968 with the High Court, leading to the National Legal Course, the National Judicial Commission, and the Attorney General's office and concluding with the creation of the Supreme Court of Appeal under the 5th Druk Gyalpo (Phuntsho, 2013, p. 567). The High Court has six justices elected by the National Assembly and the King for terms of five years versus the United States system of lifetime appointments. Lower courts known as the magistrate's court involve civil disputes and other small petitions that are made to the the Druk Gylapo (Savada, 1991).

As the policymaking engine, the Tshogdu National Assembly can call any government representative to testify on public policy concerns, invoking the concept of "full freedom of expression" upon the power of the assembly (Singh, 1972, p. 104). The local administration seen as the fourth branch of Bhutan's government is comprised of a village authority. Its head leader, the Gapp, is elected by one vote from each family in their village and is in charge of carrying out the orders of their specific district. The Gapp's power is constantly underestimated, but has the authority to pursue justice and elect people's representatives who communicate closely with their constituency, creating an important connect with the central government and the Tshogdu National Assembly (Singh, 1972, p. 107). The King's acceptance speech to represent the crown is often a sounding board for the potential policies he wants to implement during his reign. This 'going public' hopes to influence and communicate directly with the public in order to put pressure on lawmakers and the government to support specific policies of the King utilizing the power of persuasion and public opinion to sway. Local communities are becoming more influential and involved in decision making policies, however, the typical socio-economic differences that exist in the western world will dominate in Bhutan.

## **The Kingdom of Bhutan's Movement to a Democracy**

Through comparing the modernization and voluntarist theories, it is easy to reach the conclusion that voluntarism emerges as the form of government in Bhutan because King Wangchuck abdicated without cause or political protest. The Gross National Happiness (GNH) factor was the Bhutanese invention of development that initiated the transition process. "The GNH was originally based on four pillars: good governance, sustainable socio-economic development, cultural preservation and environmental conservation, which were later further classified into nine domains: psychological well-being, health, education, time use, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standards" (Fahsi, 2014). The purpose of the GNH was developed to depict that the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is necessary to create happiness and attract attention through citizen empowerment of collective happiness and social, economic, and political changes; this was vigilantly planned before the free and fair democratic elections of 2008. Many believe that external factors do not lead to happiness which proves the ineffectiveness of the GDP or Human Development Index, is a composite statistic of life expectancy, education, and per capita income indicators, which are used to rank countries into four tiers of human development. Whereas, the GNH works with happiness as a "public good" that seeks its goals through the implementation of public policy.

On the other hand, people argue that "happiness is a state of the mind" and therefore extremely subjective (Phuntsho, 2013, p. 597). Since the 1950s, numerous decentralization efforts have been underway, such as the Tshogdu National Assembly, separating the country into twenty distinct districts known as (dzongkhags), the creation of a local constituency that could appoint their own leaders, the gapp and the Council of Ministers who received the power to appoint members to the Chimis Parliament (Sinpeng, 2007, p. 39). Most importantly, King Wangchuck allowed for a vote of confidence to be reinstated which enabled Parliament to terminate a prime minister's appointment, if the prime minister no longer represents the majority of government interests linking the importance of parliament back to the office of Prime Minister (Samuels, 2012). The creation of Bhutan's national Constitution was extremely unusual as it was a "pre-emptive, royal directive", since the country's representation is very conservative

(Sinpeng, 2007, p. 40). Its ideology established a constitutional monarchy in a democratic system, but most Bhutanese felt the royal structure was effective and did not accept that the king would need to retire before his sixty-fifth birthday to enable Bhutan's transition to a democracy. Within two years of the 4<sup>th</sup> king's descent, his son claimed the throne in 2008, encouraging a political movement through mock elections (Phuntsho, 2013, p. 571).

### **Educational Efforts and Brain Drain**

The Gross National Happiness program of the Kingdom of Bhutan entitled Bhutanese Local Governance Support was conceptualized to establish finance systems for the local government and create training for government employees as well as elected officers. Bhutan's attempt to establish modernization brought increasing development in education. This Local Governance Program was meant to strengthen the central government's functions to help prevent a population decrease due to brain drain. Brain drain is the "export of human capital to industrialized countries" from developing or competing underdeveloped nations (Schiavo, 2014). By adopting the UN Millennium Declaration during the end of its monarchical reign, Bhutan has strived to achieve primary education for students, so that they can learn at home instead of going abroad for educational needs. While the Kingdom of Bhutan seems to be able to control their government with diverse programs and their efforts of political transition, the country could improve their post-secondary educational and vocational opportunities. Furthermore, citizens leave to provide financial support for their families, but this migration creates poverty and hinders manufacturing jobs. The lack of post-secondary education means a rising percentage of college students journey from Asia to the United States for intellectual incentive, opportunity, and citizenship. Another significant factor that affects brain drain is overseas expansion of an employer's company which cause mass relocation. With every social class, the number of skilled employees "among migrants is approximately 33 percent for developing countries [which] is much higher than the proportion of skilled workers among residents" which usually results in six percent (Docquier, Lohest, & Marfouk, 2007). The history of brain drain is a multi-cultural concern that affects health, wealth, and intelligence of the world, but resolutions can be enacted to protect human rights and improve the intelligence of the nation. Education resolutions are dire for Bhutan which is losing native people to more



developed states; ironically encouraging Bhutanese citizens to leave for opportunities will result in a greater likelihood of return due to family ties.

Furthermore, as societal changes emerge and feminism takes root in Bhutan, progressive changes are asserting equality for women. Women traditional held normed responsibilities of running the household with minimal influence outside of this traditional role. Now "in the zomdus in the villages and in geog meetings, women are the main participants and they have been elected as people's representatives to the National Assembly" (Mathou, 2009). This is critical as in order to be elected to the National Assembly or National Council, one needs to have a university degree and although there are far fewer women with such degrees, inroads are being made. "While the two new parties for 2013 were headed by women, both lost in the preliminary election for the National Assembly" (Mathou, 2009). This equates to progress even with females attending university in the states; the key is educational equity as The Prime Minister of Bhutan has expressed that "Ninety-nine percent return,' because of culture, religion, trade, and family roots" (Schiavo, 2014). If a competitive income can be earned, then skilled works can send money back to their Bhutan-based families; after all this is the concept of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to realize their full human potential by leaving jobs in the government for positions in the private sector (Business Bhutan, 2010). With these new applications, Bhutan will continue with economic growth, an increase in employment rate, and competition of job opportunities with neighboring countries.

### **Further Implications and Conclusion**

In July 2008, Bhutan successfully completed their first elections and inaugurated its new constitution "to secure the blessings of liberty, to ensure justice and tranquility and to enhance the unity, and happiness, and well-being of the people for all time" (Phuntsho, 2013, p. 572). While a peaceful transition from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system has occurred, Bhutan has yet to establish itself as prominent nation-state.

The Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (Peace and Prosperity) Party and the People's Democratic Party are the two main parties of the Bhutan government, the latter in majority with thirty-two

seats post 2013 democratic elections (Sinpeng, 2007, p. 41; Phuntsho, 2013, 590-595). The 2008 introduction of the bicameral parliament with the existing National Assembly and the addition of the upper house, the National Council. The National Council referred to as the House of Review oversees existing laws, determines the outcome of laws approved by the Tshogdu National Assembly, and creates legislation except for monetary or financial incentivized bills as it completely subordinate to the Tshogdu with a vision “to be a principal apolitical institution of a vibrant democracy that shall promote the wellbeing of the people while safeguarding the security and sovereignty of the Kingdom” (National Council of Bhutan, 2008). Efforts of decentralization and democratic transition are still in the works, but with the appointment of a 5th King, a new election process, and social, cultural, and economic development Bhutan has utilized active modernization and passive globalization to spread its movements. This shift from an absolute to constitutional monarchy with a march towards democracy and the interest in the Gross National Happiness index where happiness trumps economic western values and consumerism makes one wonder if Bhutan can continue to isolate themselves from western values. As countries become closer due to technology, will this affect the younger generation who have grown closer to westernized thought and information technology in an extremely industrialized society. The challenges involved in maintaining adherence to democracy remain as urgent as they are complex.

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