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Bhutan: Elections 2013

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MEDHA BISHT, JAN 2 2013

Come April and June 2013, Bhutan will experience its second round of parliamentary elections. While the past five years have constituted an exploratory phase for Bhutan, in terms of experimenting and internalizing democratic norms, it would not be an exaggeration to state that the formal structures of democracy have well taken roots in Bhutan. Even as one often comes across the description of “democracy as a gift” (*kidu*) from the King, an analytical overview reveals that the process of democratization has indeed given rise to various stakeholders in the internal politics of Bhutan. How far the internal democratic space impinges on Bhutan’s foreign policy orientations is to be seen in the years ahead.

Bhutan has successfully passed the democratic test. The constitution guarantees basic fundamental rights, with the right to exercise freedom of expression and opinion and form associations.[1] There is an independent media and citizens have protection from the arbitrary actions of the state, particularly bodily injury and physical harm.[2] There is certainly separation of powers, where different institutions like the Election Commission, Royal Civil Service Commission, the Royal Court of Justice, the Anti-Corruption Commission, the National Assembly and the National Council effectively guard and stand by their respective turfs.

In electoral procedures, Bhutan has embraced the first past the post system, which allows only two parties to contest for elections. The electoral process would thus take place in two rounds -April and June. While the potential parties would all contest the first round of elections, the second round would be contested by the two parties which garner the maximum amount of votes in the first round. Unlike 2008, when only two political parties had made their presence visible, in April 2013, there are five political parties for consideration. These are: Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT), People’s Democratic Party (PDP), Bhutan Kuen-Ngyam Party (BKP), Druk Chirwang Tshogpa (DCT) and Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT). The three aspiring political parties – BKP, DCT and DNT – have submitted their application to the Election Commission seeking to register as political parties. This is the first step to gain legitimacy to contest the elections.[3]

While Druk Phuensum Tshogpa is the incumbent party in Bhutan and has chances of coming to power in the next round of elections too, People’s Democratic Party is currently the opposition party. Led by Tsering Tobgay, the party has been vocal on various socio-economic policies being followed by the ruling party in power.

Bhutan Kuen-Ngyam Party is a new party, which focuses on equality. Mr Sonam Tobgay is the interim party President. The party’s slogan is “service before self” and its manifesto is focused on equal opportunities, employment, people empowerment, economic growth and distribution of wealth under a clean and competent government dedicated to the development of democratic institutions and processes[4]

Druk Chirwang Tshogpa is another new party in the race and has Ms Lily Wangchuk, a well-known career diplomat and social activist, as its leader. The rights of women and marginalized are stated to be the main focus of the party.

Finally, Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa is also a potential party and focuses on freedom, justice and solidarity as its motto. It has no declared leader at this point.

Meanwhile, recasting democracy through the frames of effective components presumes a different trajectory.

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Charles Tilly, in his seminal book *Democracy*,^[5] provides a definition on the effective components of democracy. He writes that “a regime is democratic to the extent that political relations between state and citizens feature broad, equal, protected and mutually binding consultations.” While the first two variables—broad and equal—entail the criterion for effective citizenship, whereby all citizens are treated equally and have no significant political rights and obligations based on ethnicity, religion, race or caste, the latter two variables emphasize protection against the arbitrary actions of the state and a substantive amount of interaction between the state and citizens, whereby pressure and interest groups have the latitude to influence the institutional structures of the state and its key policies through various means.

Given this definition, assessing the process of democratization through an applied parameter would be a useful exercise, since such issues are also triggering some discussion in Bhutan. For instance, Tsering Tobgay, the Opposition Leader, commenting on effective democracy recently noted the need for intra-party democracy in Bhutan, as the first step if Bhutan was to successfully pass the test for democracy.^[6]

Some other factors which could prove to be the litmus test for effective democratization and should occupy the energies of political parties in the coming years are: balanced socio-economic development, youth employment, political rights for minorities, and balancing foreign policy orientations in its immediate neighbourhood (read China and India).

Socio-economic development will be the primary challenge for Bhutan in the coming years. If one casts a brief look at the health sector, as per the latest figures, the number of available doctors per 10,000 population is just 3^[7]. This is in stark contrast to other available figures which point to a much brighter picture, where the percentage of population covered by health care and percentage of population with access to safe drinking water is 88 and 70 percent respectively^[8]. Similarly, while the GDP growth rate in Bhutan is 8.5 percent, which effectively is one of the highest in South Asia, unemployment has been posed as yet another looming challenge in Bhutan, as 40 percent of the population is young.^[9] The growing hydro-power sector demands skills and professional expertise, which are yet to be nurtured in Bhutan and thus would take some time. Most of the expertise is thus imported from India. This has been expressed as a serious concern by some sections of Bhutanese society.^[10]

Another bone of contention is the issue of Bhutanese refugees who are settled in the Eastern camps of Nepal. With the resettlement programme offered by the developed countries, though the number of refugees in camps of Nepal has shrunk by 60 percent^[11], repatriation is still being discussed at an official level between Nepal and Bhutan.^[12] There are also nudging questions regarding the Nyingma sect (practiced by the Sharchops) in Eastern Bhutan, who were supposedly ousted from Bhutan in the 1990s. However, these issues are less talked about and are under wraps from public scrutiny. Today, the *Kagyü* sect of Buddhism has emerged as the dominant strand. While there have been allegations from detractors like Tek Nath Rizal, a Bhutanese refugee, who has openly spoken against the atrocities imposed on him by the Bhutanese state and King,^[13] Bhutan for its part has remained officially silent and is reluctant to discuss such issues in the public domain.

Given the active citizen-state interaction as a parameter for effective democracy, domestic spaces have indeed opened up in Bhutan. This can be seen in the hydro-power sector and the relatively small but growing business community, which have made inroads into the Bhutanese political economy. The significance of these issues came out in the open in July 2012, when a certain tender was given to *Global Traders and Gangjung (GT)*, which is a supplier of Chinese vehicles. The issue was debated in Bhutan's domestic media about the procedures of transparency associated with the tendering process^[14]. The episode is also a pointer to the growing interest in opening up to China.

Commenting on effective components of democracy Lily Wangchuk, in a personal interview^[15] with the author, categorically stated that, while formal structures had taken root, informal groups and collectives to voice the opinion of common people were yet to emerge in Bhutan. She also expressed caution over the growing importance of the business community, which she considered could be harmful to Bhutanese democracy in the long term. The comment was expressed in the backdrop of constraints confronting the funding of the political parties in Bhutan.

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While Bhutan has a long way to go in its democratization process, with certain social and economic issues to be addressed and taken up, there are foreign policy challenges too, which will have to be addressed as years pass by. Resolving the boundary dispute with China would be one of them, as there is substantial domestic pressure in Bhutan to resolve it. In a recent furor over the publication of maps in the new Chinese passport which displayed the 269 km² of disputed Bhutanese territory as belonging to China, the Foreign Minister in Charge, Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuk, in a public statement announced that “safeguarding Bhutan’s territorial integrity is the national priority of the Royal Government and it is one of the important foreign policy objectives.”[16]

Such issues will become more visible and coherent as domestic spaces open up in Bhutan beyond 2012.

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[1] See Article 7 (Fundamental Rights), The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, at: [http://www.constitution.bt/TsaThrim%20Eng%20\(A5\).pdf](http://www.constitution.bt/TsaThrim%20Eng%20(A5).pdf). (Accessed December 19, 2012)

[2] See Article 7 (19 and 20), The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, at: [http://www.constitution.bt/TsaThrim%20Eng%20\(A5\).pdf](http://www.constitution.bt/TsaThrim%20Eng%20(A5).pdf) (Accessed December 19, 2012)

[3] Email interaction with Pasang Dorji, journalist, Bhutan, December 13, 2012.

[4] Puran Gurung, “ Political Office Sacred and Noble- Service Before Self—BKP,” Centennial Radio, August 16, 2012, at: <http://www.centennialradio.com/component/content/article/12-news/475-political-office-sacred-and-noble,-“service-before-self”-bkp.html> (Accessed December 20, 2012)

[5] Charles Tilly, *Democracy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.10

[6] Tsering Tobgay, *Democratic Parties*, Tsering Tobgay’s Blog, September 17, 2012, at: <http://www.tsheringtobgay.com/democracy/2012/democratic-parties.html> (Accessed December 20, 2012)

[7] Statistical Year Book of Bhutan-2012, National Statistics Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan, p. 12 at: <http://www.nsb.gov.bt/pub/syb/syb2012.pdf> . (Accessed December 21, 2012)

[8] *Ibid*, p. 13

[9] Bhutan at a Glance-2012, National Statistics Bureau, Royal Government of Bhutan, October 2012, at: <http://www.nsb.gov.bt/pub/baag/BAAG%202012.pdf> (Accessed December 21, 2012)

[10] Personal interaction in Thimpu, Bhutan, May 14-22, 2012.

[11] Bhutan: 2012 Regional Operations Profile – South Asia, UNHCR, at:

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<http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e487646.html> (Accessed December 21, 2012)

[12] “Nepal to ask Bhutan to repatriate exiled *citizens*,” *Bhutan News Service*, September 29, 2012, at: <http://www.bhutannewsservice.com/main-news/politics/bhutan-must-resolve-refugee-issue-nepal-dmp/> (Accessed December 21, 2012)

[13] Tek Nath Rizal, *Torture Killing Me Softly*, Kathmandu: Jagdamba Press, 2009.

[14] Medha Bisht, “Chinese Inroads into Bhutan: Diplomatic Gimmick or Strategic Reality,” August 14, 2012, IDSA Strategic Commnet, at: http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/ChineseInroadsintoBhutan_mbisht_140812 (Accessed December 21, 2012).

[15] Personal Interview with the Author, May 17, 2012, Thimpu, Bhutan.

[16] Minjur Dorji, “Bhutan not endorsing Chinese passport claims on Bhutanese territory says acting Foreign Minister,” *The Bhutanese*, December 5, 2012, at: <http://www.thebhutanese.bt/bhutan-not-endorsing-chinese-passport-claims-on-bhutanese-territory-says-acting-foreign-minister/>. (Accessed December 21, 2012)