

# Bearing Better Witness in Bhutan

NITASHA KAUL

The recent political change in Bhutan – the transition to parliamentary democracy from absolute monarchy – was not an attempt to hoodwink the international community. The political gradualist nature of the democratic process is an asset for the country.

Bhutan was recently in international news because of its peaceful transition to a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy.<sup>1</sup> As different from often simplistic and hastily written journalistic pieces,<sup>2</sup> scholarship on any topic ought to be more in-depth, analytical and a product of serious research. With this in mind, I approached Mathew Joseph's article 'Bhutan: 'Democracy' from Above' (May 10, 2008) and came away disappointed. I write this response detailing my disagreement and giving an alternative view that appreciates the uniqueness of the transition.

## Democratisation Process

The use of the scare-quotes around the word "democracy" in Joseph's title is meant to signify that there is a falsity to it, something undemocratic about the experiment with democracy. Adopting a wholly cynical view of the transition, Joseph says that it is an attempt "by the Bhutanese ruling elite to hoodwink the international community...to deviate the attention of the international community from the resolution of the refugee problem and to accommodate the emerging political dissent in Bhutan..." (p 31). Had a close study of democratisation of political process in Bhutan revealed that the primary goal was indeed to deflect attention and fool the people, one could have accepted Joseph's basic premise. But there is no evidence to back Joseph. When a country decides to bring democracy at a time of its own choosing, during a period when there is no evident internal or external pressure (and there is absolutely no serious researcher or observer of Bhutan who suggests that during the first decade of the 21st century, the royal establishment was facing a grave crisis in terms of international condemnation and/or internal dissent),<sup>3</sup> how can one conclude otherwise?

Bhutan, in spite of being a small and relatively impoverished state, has managed to avoid being a puppet in the hands of the bigger nations and is a lesson in the (inter)national politics of small states. There was no specific pressure on Bhutan from the west purporting to spread democracy nor from its neighbour, India, which generally avoids democracy promotion as a principle of foreign policy. After the conclusion of violent conflicts in south Bhutan in the early 1990s (the "southern problem" involving tens of thousands of refugees inside Nepal, many of them claiming to be evicted from Bhutan)<sup>4</sup>, the monarchy was in a stable state. I wish Joseph had enlightened us with at least some details on the exact nature of the "emerging political dissent" that the elite were supposedly seeking to accommodate.

## Free and Fair Election

Violence, disputes, horse-trading, criminalisation and corruption mar elections in large parts of the world and Bhutan has avoided this. The non-confrontational and civil nature of campaigning did not make the elections "uneventful" (p 29) but refreshingly different. One segment of Bhutanese society that takes its responsibility toward democracy extremely seriously is the media. Another is the civil society organisations which are taking root and doing valuable work. In addition to the main national newspaper *Kuensel*, at present there are two other independent and widely circulating papers – *Bhutan Times* and *Bhutan Observer*, both of which contribute significantly to the public discourse on crucial issues, and introspect at length on the changes unfolding in the country. There is Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) TV and multilingual BBS radio and other FM channels such as Kuzoo, Radio Valley, and Centennial – all of which cater to different segments of the population. There are several local NGOs and while they are not allowed to be involved in politics, this is not necessarily bad in a small society where voice within politics is directly accessible, and it saves the NGOs from losing credibility. As the experience of Bangladesh shows, in smaller countries politicised NGOs often become

Nitasha Kaul ([nitasha.kaul@gmail.com](mailto:nitasha.kaul@gmail.com)) is a writer and academic at the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster in London, UK.

actors in their own right, are democratically unaccountable and exercise disproportionate influence in electoral politics. This restriction was a well-thought move on the part of the political establishment in a nascent democracy in a small south Asian country.

Apart from the emerging civil society and a growing media, various other institutions such as the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) had been put in place before 2008 to ensure free and fair elections. Nothing was rushed and hurried. The institutions, regulatory mechanisms, legal constitutional framework, formation of political parties, candidate criteria, voter education, and so on were gradually put into place over the period of a decade culminating in the final elections to the national assembly on March 24, 2008. Joseph is therefore unfair in making the unsubstantiated assertion that Bhutan is characterised by the “non-existence of an autonomous society and free media” (p 29).

A turnout of 79.4 per cent, including in the areas populated by Lhotsampas (‘Nepalis’ as Joseph casually characterises them, ignoring the loaded and problematic nature of ethnic categorisations), in the first ever election is surely an impressive figure by the standard of any country in the world. The putative “emerging political dissent” Joseph casually mentions in the concluding sentence is not the same as the longer opposition politics, whose genealogy he traces earlier in the article; let me explain why.

### Opposition Politics

Earlier he points out that no contrast should be drawn between the unenlightened Nepalese monarch and the modernising Bhutanese monarch since such a projection “camouflages the various struggles waged by the people to achieve human rights and democracy in Bhutan” (p 31). Democracy is an ideal, a critical and contested concept, an actual practice of government, a politics of struggle and accommodation. Unless we stay in the realm of abstract thought, where democracy as a universal ideal can never be accommodated within a particularistic statism (and nothing in the article suggests that Joseph is trying to push the boundary of the

concept of democracy), the world we live in adopts democracy as a form of government within a state.

Joseph’s genealogy of the opposition politics in Bhutan since 1920s seems to adopt a simple view that opposition to the state equals a democratic struggle. The reality is far more complex. A state can be authoritarian and the opposition democratic; at the same time, the state can be open while the opposition not shy away from using violent undemocratic tactics ruthlessly exterminating any dissent. It is not helpful to provide a metanarrative of oppositional politics as if existing they existed in an unbroken continuum.

The struggle of the opposition in 1920s-60s was quite different from that in the 1970s-90s. For instance, Joseph underplays that in the later decades, most opposition got a strong ethnic dimension, became part of wider regional resurgence of Gurkha chauvinism, and a serious threat to Bhutan’s very existence as a state. He blames the “Bhutanisation drive initiated by the fourth king Jigme Singye Wangchuck” as a response to the “merger of Sikkim with India” for the resurgence of opposition politics in the late 1970s and 1980s. The dissenters, according to Joseph, comprised angry people of Nepali origin coming out on the streets, forming numerous human rights organisations and political parties, but he mentions no violence. So, we get a perfect picture postcard of bad state – innocent minorities here – arrogant Bhutanese royalty discriminating against ethnic minorities and the latter struggling for human rights. But the reality is not as black and white. While some may have struggled for human rights and others for democratic rights, there was a strong dimension of violence against the Bhutanese state and property and very serious attacks against the majority of the Lhotsampas who were accused of collaborating with the state. This logic of oppositional struggle in a multi-ethnic set-up, where the extremists’ main physical attack is on the moderates within is well known to the scholars on political violence.

In the case of Bhutan, the southern problem is a complex one, demanding a serious analysis of state building, nation making, struggles for legitimacy, identity politics, sovereignty and those left out of

it, and so on. It cannot be dealt in detail here. It is easy to adopt bad kings/innocent opposition (in refuge) framework as Joseph does. As examples from the rest of the region amply reveal, there is no necessary correlation between democratic legitimacy and protection of human rights (e.g., the violence in Gujarat in 2002 with majority of victims being Muslims). No state – democratic, monarchical, or otherwise – by their very political nature (“monopoly over legitimate violence”) can tolerate threats to its own existence coming from anti-statist violence. Unless one makes a principled stance against the very notion of states having monopoly over legalised violence and venerates all opposition to the state (including violent ones) as democratic, and Joseph certainly does not seem to do so, one cannot deny the Bhutanese state the right to defend itself. As the political decision-makers inside Bhutan themselves realise, the refugee crisis is a serious issue with a humanitarian face that requires a durable solution.<sup>5</sup>

In the parliamentary elections, there were no identifiable differences in the voter turnout, voting pattern, or party performance in different parts of Bhutan populated by different ethnic groups; in itself a clear validation of people across the board accepting the legitimate democratic transition initiated from above. The presence of ministers with Lhotsampa ethnicity in the new government is dismissed by Joseph as another example of window-dressing for fooling the international community and not as a serious democratic effort to integrate different people under a single multiethnic nation state. It is not credible to ignore the participation of the majority of Lhotsampas living inside Bhutan as a charade while representing the views of some political leaders in exile as representing true aspirations.

### Factual Errors

Let me also highlight some other factual errors and misrepresentations in the earlier piece. Both the political parties Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) and People’s Democratic Party (PDP) were competing to make bigger promises of better and greater services to the voters, they were not competing “regarding their loyalty to

the king and the existing ruling establishment” (p 29). An equivalent argument to the one Joseph makes, say, in the British elections, would be that democracy is incomplete because by not rejecting monarchy, all three major parties always scramble to prove loyalty to the monarchy in all the elections. Monarchy is not an electoral issue in Britain, nor was it in Bhutan. It was the institution that brought about democratic transformation through careful planning, painstaking efforts, and active involvement of the kings in educating the Bhutanese to the responsibility of citizenship. International observers announced the election of March 2008 as free and fair and other countries in the region should be willing to acknowledge this remarkable feat.

Another achievement of the Bhutanese political establishment – the idea and now the promised index of gross national happiness (GNH) – is similarly undermined by those who talk of GNH index as “vaguely defined” (p 29). Bhutan takes its natural environment seriously and unlike most developing countries does not argue for sacrificing it at the altar of immediate economic growth. Responsible eco-tourism is encouraged; mountains are considered sacred, not to be trampled upon by climbers. The focus on GNH means that the means-ends questions in development are not sidestepped. A tiny country with very limited resources keeping ownership of its development agenda and even offering an alternative to the dominant ideas of economic growth (through GNH): this is what makes Bhutan unique.

## Conclusions

The incrementalist and gradualist nature of the democratic process is an asset for Bhutan. While learning from the experience of other countries and accepting support from some of them (for example, the electronic voting machines came from India), a close analysis of Bhutanese democracy shows it to be largely indigenous. Intimate relations with India and even dependence on it economically should not be read as compromising Bhutan’s autonomy. The fact that Bhutan’s political elite has managed to retain and further the country’s autonomy in foreign affairs and the recently renegotiated 2007 Indo-Bhutanese

Treaty establishing the relationship on equal footing is a testimony to this. The Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh visited Bhutan after the election and recently the Bhutanese prime minister Jigme Thinley visited India. Clearly, democracy in Bhutan is in everyone’s interest. It is a well-considered response to the demands for state building, national consolidation, human development (with a conscious effort to model it on GNH), and cultural specificities of different groups of people within Bhutan [Kaul 2008b, forthcoming]. It is not a rushed reaction to hide serious problems under the carpet. As most observers of democracies will accept, democratisation invariably leads to more openness and scrutiny and it does not make sense to introduce it unless one is serious about greater modernisation within a country.

Where else do we find an absolute monarch at the peak of his authority, with widespread support internally and externally, voluntarily giving up his powers,<sup>6</sup> cajoling democratic spirit into a largely anxious population? Bhutan’s democracy is primarily a gift from the monarch; it has come from above in an unusual manner, now its success will depend on striking the right roots on the ground.

## NOTES

- 1 However, journalistic accounts on the whole did not succeed in doing justice to the remarkable democratisation in Bhutan. I have elsewhere analysed some of this international print media coverage at the time of the national assembly elections [Kaul 2008a]. Comparatively speaking, the Indian press reports were frequent and focused on more geostrategic concerns.
- 2 For instance, William Dalrymple asks in *The Telegraph* on March 23, 2008, “What use is democracy to idyllic Bhutan?”. It is on the wrong side of quite a few facts – there is no limit to tourist numbers (he suggests “tourist numbers are carefully limited to 20,000 a year”), the “tax of \$200 day” is not just a tax (it covers several subsistence and travel facilities for the tourist), it is incorrect to say that in the mock elections “everyone voted for a different

coloured dragon” and the “yellow dragons won” (people voted yellow overwhelmingly, it is the colour with royal associations). Far worse is his assertion that “this remarkable environmental and economic success story is under threat. Not by climate change, Maoist revolutionaries, Islamist terrorism or any of the usual suspects, but by a force we normally regard as wholly positive: democracy.” Democracy is not a threat to Bhutan, because it has not been imported wholesale from elsewhere. Ironically, the candidate from Gelephu whose interview to Bhutan’s national newspaper *Kuensel*, Dalrymple chooses to quote at length – Garab Dorji – to show how polite and upright the politicians are, compared to the UK, was already disqualified by the Election Commission of Bhutan for inciting divisiveness! Presumably, Dalrymple writing a day before the elections (he says the elections are “tomorrow”) had not checked the latest. He brings in the gratuitous mention of the king’s “four beautiful wives”, and his comments exclusively refer to the troubles of democracies in south Asian countries, with no mention of the west.

- 3 The crisis relating to the guerrilla camps in 2003 was not a challenge to the Wangchuck rule, but one to the sovereign state and its capacity to guard its borders.
- 4 There is no universal agreement over the identity of the refugees, e.g. how many of them fled or left Bhutan. While sympathising with the plight of the dispossessed, one also needs to be aware of the politics surrounding the refugee camps.
- 5 Negotiations have not failed “due to the insincerity of Bhutan and the lack of political will in the case of Nepal” as Joseph writes. As the American programme of resettling tens of thousands of people from the refugee camps to the US came into operation – it is odd to see that Joseph writing in May 2008 mentions the proposed third country resettlement and not the actual programme that had already begun earlier in 2008 – it became clear that a big obstacle comes from the vested interests within the refugee camps.
- 6 The fourth and the fifth kings travelled throughout the country to raise democratic awareness amongst the population. The drafting of the constitution was initiated in 2001, draft announced in 2005 and after much discussion and debate in the newly elected parliament, the constitution was adopted in July 2008. The fourth king announced the transition to democracy during National Day (December 17) 2005, but contra Joseph (“abdicated his throne in favour of his son...in December 2005”), he abdicated in 2006 when the fifth king assumed power.

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