BHUTAN'S DEFERENTIAL DEMOCRACY
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Parties and their leaders take cues from the 34 year old king and his 58 year old father, who still lives in Bhutan. Democracy is also enabling Bhutanese to discuss issues of governance and public morality with a frankness that was unknown during the pre democratic period. Currently, according to the International Monetary Fund's figures for annual Purchasing Power Parity GDP per capita, Bhutan is the richest of the seven South Asian countries. Yet without infrastructure improvements, Bhutan is going to find itself stuck not only socioeconomically, but politically.

The small eastern Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan has in recent years moved, under royal guidance, from absolute monarchy to constitutionalism and a regime that might be called "top down democracy." In 2005, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk announced to some surprise that there would be elections for a new Parliament within a few years, and that he would abdicate in favor of his eldest son, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk. A royal edict lifted the ban on political parties, and as of March 2008 the country could boast a freely elected legislature consisting of a 25 member upper house (the National Council) and a 47 member lower house (the National Assembly). The year 2008 also saw the promulgation of Bhutan's first formal, written constitution, work on which had begun under royal sponsorship back in 2001. In mid 2013 came a second parliamentary balloting and with it a peaceful turnover of government, as the opposition party went from 2 to 32 lower house seats and assumed the reins of power under a new prime minister and cabinet. The key mover behind Bhutan's emergence as a democratic constitutional monarchy has been the Wangchuk Dynasty itself, whose five kings have followed one another on the throne since 1907. When the fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, stepped down in 2006 as part of his plan to advance the shift toward
constitutionalism and democracy, he was bucking significant pressure from both his country's nobles and the populace at large, who shared a reluctance to experiment with what many saw as an alien and untested political system.

The fourth king was acting along lines laid down by his father, who in 1953 had established Bhutan's first National Assembly even as he abolished serfdom and slavery and introduced wheeled vehicles. Under the young fifth king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk, democratic institutions have reached their most fully realized form yet and have begun to win popular acceptance. With the July 2013 assumption of power by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the shift into opposition of the once ruling Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party (DPT), the country moved halfway toward completing Samuel P. Huntington's "two turnover test" of democratic consolidation.

Before turning to the structure of Bhutan's evolving democratic institutions, it is useful to note that royal initiatives in favor of constitutional democracy have not been driven solely by selfless enlightenment. Instead, the monarchy is best understood as acting prudently in reaction to pressures emanating both from Bhutanese society and from a demanding regional environment dominated by the two huge neighbors that completely surround tiny Bhutan: China and India. In the early 1950s, the example of the Indian National Congress and the movement for self-government that it had successfully led helped to inspire the formation of the Bhutan State Congress (a similar Congress party arose in Nepal as well) and to motivate the king's creation of the National Assembly.

That was far from enough to bring about a democratic political order, of course. Renewed democratic demands began to be heard in 1990 as the Druk National Congress, whose members came mostly from Bhutan's ethnic Nepali population, reacted to the discrimination that they faced under the newly mandatory legal regime known as Driglam Namzha. Enacted to codify Tibetan Buddhist cultural dominance in the face of a burgeoning Hindu Nepali population, the law drew impetus from events in nearby Sikkim. There, in the mid-1970s, an ethnic Tibetan and Buddhist monarchy had been ended by a surging ethnic Nepali movement acting with encouragement from New Delhi, which would soon absorb Sikkim into the Republic of
India. The fourth king, who had acceded to the Bhutanese throne while still a teenager in 1972, had already moved to limit Bhutanese citizenship to only those Nepalis whose parents had become citizens of Bhutan under the citizenship regulation of 1958. In 1977, reacting to the growing numbers of Nepalis who were arriving to pursue job opportunities created by development projects, Bhutan began restricting immigration. The late 1980s and early 1990s were years of tense and sometimes violent confrontations over Driglam Namzha and its requirements. More than a hundred thousand ethnic Nepalis left Bhutan for Nepal and India (as of July 2013, the CIA World Factbook placed Bhutan's population at just slightly more than 725,000). In Nepal, these Bhutanese refugees came under the influence of that country's violent Maoist insurgency. By 1996, the Maoists had launched a "people's war" whose aims included the destruction of Nepal's monarchy and the founding of a socialist republic. The Nepalese monarchy responded by resorting to authoritarian methods, but signs of its failure were evident by 2006 (it would be abolished in 2008).

Aware of the dangers to his throne posed by these events especially given the radicalization of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal the fourth king astutely chose to push farther down the path of reform, opening up the system and propelling it toward democracy under subtle but unmistakable royal guidance. The "guided" aspects of Bhutanese democracy are evident in more ways than one. The three member Election Commission subjects parties aspiring to compete for office only officially registered parties may do so to close scrutiny, requiring them as a condition of registration to reveal their aims and objectives, funding sources, and leaders' backgrounds, among other things. Elections themselves are held in two stages, beginning with a primary round that eliminates all but the two parties with the highest vote totals. In addition, parliamentary seats may only be held by people with college degrees a highly restrictive condition in a country with a literacy rate of no more than 60 percent and a narrow educational base. In some constituencies, the degree requirement led local elections to be delayed up to three years, with races originally set for 2008 being completed only in 2011. Some registered parties could not find enough graduates to fill out their slates. On the whole, parties and their leaders take cues from
the 34yearold king and his 58yearold father, who still lives in Bhutan. The Druk National Congress (now operating from exile in India and Nepal) and other critics express ire at the visible presence of royal family members in the political arena. Yet it cannot be denied that royal guidance deserves credit for directing the growth of Bhutanese democracy along desirable lines, complete with promising institutions that give the system a strong shot at long term viability. The palace played a large role in orchestrating the constitution writing process. Drawing on Buddhist precepts as well as international human rights charters and twenty other countries' basic laws, this document provides representative institutions for localities and regions as well as the nation. To reflect the federal underpinnings of an otherwise centralized polity, the constitutional scheme includes an upper house that consists of twenty members directly elected by the regions plus five royal nominees (none of the 25 may hold a party affiliation). The premier and cabinet are responsible to the 47member lower house. Regions, districts, and villages all have their own elected officials. The judiciary has underlined its independence by carrying out the investigation, trial, and dismissal of a home affairs minister for corruption. And the Election Commission has proven its organizational caliber and acumen by successfully conducting peaceful and orderly voting at the local, regional, and national levels despite large challenges posed by Bhutan's poor infrastructure and difficult terrain (the country contains the world's highest unclimbed mountain, 7,570meter Gangkhar Puensum).

The Elections of 2008 and 2013
Bhutan's elections may go forward smoothly, but that does not mean they are drama free. On the contrary, in both 2008 and 2013, the National Assembly races produced striking results. In 2008, turnout was 80 percent and the DPT came close to a sweep, winning 45 seats and leaving only a pair for the opposition PDP. The PDP's leader could not even win a seat that year, losing his constituency by a few hundred votes even though he was the king's uncle. It is true that he had differences with the king over various matters, but this is incidental to the deeper lesson: Even in a country where the monarchy is as prominent and effectual as it is in Bhutan, royal ties will be no guarantee of political success under democratic conditions.
In 2013, turnout dropped to 60 percent well short of the 2008 figure, but still reasonably robust for a sparsely populated land with low educational levels and difficult travel conditions. The ruling DPT unexpectedly lost the second round despite outpacing the PDP by 20 percentage points in the first round, finishing with just 15 seats to the PDP's 32 seats. The PDP's leaders credited their surprise win to rising public anger at corruption and gaps in the rule of law (the home affairs minister's case was only the most prominent of several involving charges of wrongdoing by high officials), as well as to the false hopes raised by the DPT's "Gross National Happiness" rhetoric. In short, in a pattern familiar from the experience of competitive democracies around the world, the opposition successfully attacked the ruling party for failing to keep its promises and make life better for ordinary people. Some observers allege that India influenced the 2013 outcome when, just days before the voting began, it withdrew the subsidies that it had been providing in order to hold down the price of cooking gas and other petroleum products. India claimed in public that the withdrawal was not politically motivated as the terms of the subsidy arrangement had come to an end and required renegotiation. However, the move was none the less widely seen as New Delhi's punitive response to the DPT's diplomatic flirtations with China (which, unlike India, does not have formal diplomatic relations with Bhutan). China insists that it will resolve its border dispute with Bhutan only after formal relations are set up and a Chinese embassy opens in Thimphu, Bhutan's capital. Reacting to the electoral defeat of the party with which it had been dealing (there had been contacts between the Bhutanese and Chinese prime ministers at various international gatherings that both attended), Beijing blamed India for treating Bhutan as a "protectorate." For its part, the new PDP government soon renegotiated the subsidy regime with India, and prices fell back to accustomed levels.

In addition to its smooth handover of power and its developing democratic institutions, Bhutan can boast expanding space for public debate and a polity whose prospects for further liberalization look promising. Highly sensitive "identity" issues such as language are now being openly discussed in the National Assembly and elsewhere. Some are arguing that insistence on the use of the official, Tibeto
Burman language (known as Dzongkha and mandatorily studied in schools nationwide) should be softened, given that it is hard to learn and that only a fourth of the populace speaks it. Democracy is also enabling Bhutanese to discuss issues of governance and public morality with a frankness that was unknown during the pre-democratic period. The new prime minister, Tshering Tobgyay, has promised to introduce a law modeled along the lines of India's 2005 Right to Information Act. His stated aim is to take his country and its government to new levels of public accountability and transparency. He has also vowed to kill the old government's plan to raise the pay of cabinet ministers and other senior public employees, saying that the money is better spent instead on development projects that will have a widespread impact on the welfare of ordinary people.

Poor infrastructure and sparse schooling pose serious challenges to Bhutan's democratic prospects. Despite efforts to widen the reach of primary education, around two fifths to half of all Bhutanese remain unlettered. Low literacy, of course, is one of the reasons why the monarchy has remained so influential. Only the spread of education and the opening of the polity can empower the people to start making their own political decisions. Bhutan's rugged and mountainous terrain the country gets very steep as one travels north makes basic transport and communications development alarmingly expensive.

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It also urgently needs a stronger and feistier media. Deference and conformism linger, with sensitive and controversial issues still not sufficiently aired. The monarchy has so far exerted its influence in a fairly gentle and subtle fashion, with healthy results. But royal guidance can only take a budding experiment in self government so far. Bhutan is tiny, but it occupies a remarkable geographical position, sandwiched as it is between the world's largest authoritarian country and its largest democracy. Will the Himalayan kingdom become an arena in which the authoritarian "China model" of economic development amid political restraints vies with the freewheeling Indian approach to growing an economy and running a country with
more than one ethnic and religious group in its territory? We should recall that while China's communist system has seldom if ever preferred to see democracy grow up on its borders, India's noisy, sometimes chaotic, and always vital democratic system has often tended to radiate its positive as well as its negative tendencies out toward its neighbors. Bhutan has its problems, to be sure the ethno linguistic tensions that trouble it are serious. Yet compared to Nepal or the Maldives, where recent moves toward democratization have touched off waves of anxiety, turbulence, and instability, Bhutan seems like a good example of how to march toward the goal of fleshed out constitutional democracy cautiously and gradually, yet resolutely and creatively. Perhaps, on its much smaller scale, Bhutan will join India as a regional model of the democratic way of life.

Footnote

NOTES

1. The term literally means "orderly system," and encompasses rules and regulations governing matters such as dress and building styles. In broad terms, it makes the culture of mountainous, Tibetan speaking, and Buddhist northern Bhutan normative, and strikes many in the southern, lower lying part of the country (who are likely to be Nepali in ethnicity and Hindu in religion) as an unwelcome imposition.

2. The term was coined by the fourth king back in 1972, and is meant to capture a fuller and more rounded picture of national wellbeing than can be attained from standard economic measures such as Gross National Product. The king first used the term in a casual way, but over the years there has grown up around it an apparatus of formal attempts to define, measure, and promote the inevitably somewhat ineffable idea of "GNH." The DPT adopted the notion of boosting Bhutan's GNH as shorthand for its governing agenda.

3. A number of other languages from the Tibeto-Burman family are spoken in Bhutan, but they are by and large not mutually intelligible with Dzongkha. The ethnic Nepali population that predominates in the lower lying region along Bhutan's southern border, meanwhile, speaks mainly Nepalese, which as an Indo Aryan tongue is from another language family entirely.


5. The IMF reports that as of October 2013, Bhutan's annual PPP
GDP pc was $6,962, putting it just above runner up Sri Lanka ($6,765) and well ahead of the Maldives ($4,603), Nepal ($3,397), Pakistan ($2,594), India ($2,563), and Bangladesh ($1,311).

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