

BHUTAN: ON A DEMOCRATIC PATH?



DRUK NATIONAL CONGRESS, BHUTAN

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INTRODUCTION

The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) released the Draft Constitution on 23rd March, 2005, after a sustained struggle by the people of Bhutan, and was distributed globally. It was claimed that prior to the formulation of this draft, the King and Crown King (father and son duo) held consultations in twenty districts in this regard. Subsequently, on 17th December 2005, a royal declaration was made at Tashi Yangtse that democracy would be established in Bhutan in 2008. The century-old oppressed people, within and outside Bhutan, in a benevolent spirit, overlooked the grave injustice heaped on them, and welcomed this gesture in the hope of a new Bhutan.

Regarding the various changes being introduced in legal enactments and governance, after the release of Draft Constitution, the Druk National Congress (DNC) has sent numerous appeals to King to undertake this process in consonance with the Draft Constitution in a democratic manner. But, the King has not demonstrated his sincerity, so far, in addressing the outstanding political issues. The DNC is committed to oppose all the undemocratic policies being thrust on the Bhutanese and urges the Bhutanese people to extend their support in this pursuit. Draft Constitution will be adopted in 2008; yet, present processes are being undertaken in the premise of Draft Constitution.

KING'S LARGER DESIGN

Time and again, the King has shown his selfish streak and nefarious designs, solely aimed for his personal gains, consequently neglecting the welfare of common citizen. One of the many unacceptable and preposterous provisions includes the stipulation of being a Western University graduate, as a minimum eligibility for contesting to Parliament, as stipulated in Election Act.

Considering the ground realities of Bhutan, coupled with the official data on education and lack of facilities available for preparing young persons for western education in the country, it is obvious that only a fraction of its population possess western graduate degrees. The wider implications of this innocent-looking stipulation are far dangerous – it excludes vast majority of Bhutanese in contesting and getting elected to Parliament. On the other hand, almost all the Bhutanese with western graduate degrees are already employed primarily with Government. In such a scenario, one can not discount the possibility of these persons coming to Parliament, after contesting the election.

There is another implication of this election provision. By preferring western education, it has made mockery of its own national language (Dzongkha) as it has now officially been recognized as an inconsequential language. Thus, Dzongkha has been rendered, *de facto*, into a second-rate language. This is indeed a paradox, as the King has presented Bhutan as a country proud of its own culture, whereas its own Constitution ridicules its national language. The King has always taken shelter under the argument of rigidly

maintaining Bhutanese identity. Now suddenly it has been robbed of its sheen. Is the King now proposing that language is not an integral part of cultural identity? Is the King merely using the language as a tool for his political aims?

A brief discussion on the language of Bhutan will be relevant here. Prior to the 1970s, 'Chokey' was taught in schools and all the administrative works were carried out in the same language. Under the Third King's direction, 'Chokey' was replaced by 'Dzongkha' in schools and administrative works. The Fourth King continued with the policy of giving thrust on Dzongkha and its promotion. As a result, there are many Dzongkha Bachelors and Masters Degree holders. However, in the recent time, the Fourth King has explicitly emphasized on western education and English language and has systematically marginalized the Dzongkha Degree holders. If the study of Dzongkha is only meant to fetch lowly paid jobs like clerks in offices, is it justifiable for students to continue studying Dzongkha in schools? Every Bhutanese must raise the question - why our own national language is receiving step-motherly treatment in our own country?

The Draft constitution stipulates 100 members of parliament (75 from Lower House and 25 from Upper House). This was a credible number, as it reflected so-called 'representation' practically from the whole nation. However, in the new scheme of things, this number is now arbitrarily fixed at 47. What is the rationale behind reducing the seats of Parliamentary members? Nobody knows. The only explanation that comes to mind is – all these changes, in conjunction, are made so that the King does not loose his grip on Parliament.

There is rampant discrimination in developmental activities undertaken in Bhutan. All the economic and political spaces are usurped by family members and relatives of King. The Fourth King has appointed his son as the Crown King without looking into the financial burden it would have on Bhutanese public. The Kings have always treated Bhutanese people as their servants. In spite of being witness to lot of discrimination in the area of bureaucracy, public sector, health, education and business, some intelligent and educated but selfish and unethical person from all communities (Sharchopa, Naglong and Lhotshampas) like Dr. Jigme Singye, Sonam Dorji, Tshering Tobgay, Namgay Jamtsho and others are assisting in the 'larger design' of the Monarchy. These people must contemplate deeply because their communities will never forget their misdeeds.

TILT IN BALANCE

Further, the Fourth King has already made up his mind that his brother-in law, Mr. Sangay Nidup, should be the first Prime Minister of Bhutan, come what may, obviously in a "democratic" manner. He has also nominated opposition parliamentarians as well as ruling parliamentarians for 2008 parliamentary Election. It is reliably learnt that resignations of senior bureaucratic officials and District Commissioners (Dzongdags)

have been procured so that they join politics and become a Member of Parliament. The Fifth King is openly campaigning for his maternal uncle. The party headed by Sangay Nidup is behaving as if it has already formed the government in Bhutan. It is corroborated by the party booklet which used the inscription of Pelden Druk Zhung (Royal Government of Bhutan). His supporters/associates/colleagues are overtly collecting party funds and forcing ignorant and innocent people to make donations for their party. Further, people are being threatened that development activities in their locality and “*Kidu*” (*ex-gratia*) would come to a halt, if they do not vote for him.

The Fourth King is feigning ignorance of these activities and has become myopic. In a country where the King rules with an iron grip, all this can not happen without his consent. The pre-eminence of Sangay Nidup, in the present set up, only reiterates that the Kings will always promote their family interests at the cost of the common people and the State. They will pre-empt any democratic movement targeted towards empowering the common citizens in any aspect - social, economic or political. The keen interest of the King in these affairs is obvious because, he and members of the royal family would be able to enjoy unflinching privileges once the parliament headed by Sangay Nidup comes into existence. Then it will be easier for the Parliament to enact laws favorable towards the royal family annuities from State as stipulated in the Constitution. Thus the King is making a mockery of democratizing Bhutan, and befooling the Bhutanese public as well as the international community at large. In fact, most of Bhutanese people are aware of these developments.

The DNC does not have any objection to Mr. Sangay Nidup making a foray into politics in a level playing field. But it is vehemently opposed to the manner in which his party in general and his candidature in particular is being promoted. The candidates having potential to oppose his candidature, are denied participation in electoral politics, courtesy various stipulations. Mr. Sangay Nidup was a seasoned bureaucrat before becoming minister and lacks democratic outlook. The retired bureaucratic officials foray in politics would only suffocate the democratic initiatives. They would obviously promote the interests of monarchy as they have been doing so far. The DNC has accepted the constitutional monarchy set up for Bhutan but however, DNC strongly condemns the dubious role of the royal family in ushering fake democracy in Bhutan, as it will only legitimize Absolute Monarchy in the country.

DISFRANCHISEMENT

Religious persons like monks and nuns including ‘gomchens’ have been barred from exercising their voting rights and participating in politics. This denial to monks and nuns living in ‘dratshangs’ and ‘rabdays’, owned and supported by Government, may have some justification. But it is apparent that this has primarily been done with an apprehension as they have potential to generate awareness against anti-democratic

activities of the monarchy. Denial of voting rights to thousands of monks, nuns and gomchens, living inside and outside Bhutan, is negation of their democratic and fundamental rights.

DEMOCRATIC ELECTION OR DEMOCRATIC FARCE?

There is a very disturbing ground reality. Fundamental human rights are still absent. Rule of law continues to be a dream. Peaceful assembly and freedom of speech and expression are banned. People are barred from participating in healthy debates and discussions on political issues. Hundreds of political prisoners are still behind bars. People are under continuing surveillance by government agents. When absolute monarchy is still intact, how can Bhutan proceed towards democratic elections for the National Council (Upper House) in October 2007? In such backdrop, what kind of democratic election is Bhutan talking about?

DRUK NATIONAL CONGRESS - LAST HOPE OF BHUTANESE PEOPLE

Druk National Congress was established to champion the fight for freedom of the hapless and oppressed Bhutanese people from the yoke of centuries-old oppressive laws of the monarchical regime. The DNC exposed and highlighted the King's intolerant, unjust, discriminatory and draconian policies. The main objectives of the DNC are to achieve justice, equality, liberty and a sense of brotherhood amongst the citizens through a democratic and peaceful path. The DNC guarantees a peaceful and harmonious co-existence of multi-lingual, multi-racial and multi-religious society. The DNC further assures that equal opportunities shall be provided to every citizen according to his/her merits. The DNC is committed to bringing a qualitative change in the economic life of the Bhutanese people. The empowering policies of the DNC, for the betterment of the common citizens are termed 'seditious' by the regime. DNC has been tagged as 'Ngolops'. We invite all to show any seditious element in the work of DNC.

DNC is least worried with Ngolop tag, as, opposition in the form of appeals or activities is targeted towards loosening the grip of the monarchy over the common people's life. We want empowerment of the common man in the political, economic and social spheres. For the betterment of common citizens, we will continue to oppose government policy if it hinders their path to enlightenment.

Despite restricting the DNC President, Mr. Rongthong Kunley Dorji, in Delhi for the last one decade in a fabricated extradition court case, DNC members in exiles are prepared to return to Bhutan in 2008, once Constitutional Monarchy is established. Members of the

DNC will deliberate and participate in political activities. DNC is committed to serving the people of Bhutan in bringing about economic prosperity, political empowerment and a peaceful life.

At the same time, DNC is of firm opinion that if the King forgoes prevailing undemocratic and unethical activities, and seeks assistance from the common people, then he must be supported. DNC is committed to extending support, in such case, so that a genuine and functional parliamentary democracy is established in Bhutan.

INDIA'S ROLE

The Bhutanese people are familiar with Indian advisors and Election Commission's numerous visits to Bhutan and presumes that constructive suggestions are being offered to their Bhutanese counterparts. But the reality on grounds has prompted many Bhutanese to question the genuineness of Indian advisors. The Government of India's aid to build the edifice of Bhutan's Supreme Court, National Assembly, National Council, Cabinet Ministers Housing and Parliamentarians Housing has made many Bhutanese people introspectively question, is the process of democratizing Bhutan taking place under the care of Government of India? However, many people including DNC also believe that this may not be true. They firmly hold the view that the Indian Government would always support the people's democratic aspirations and initiatives. The international community, including the UN and USA-led core working group on Bhutanese issues, must emphasize on the establishment of 'genuine democracy' in Bhutan.

APPEAL

With the advent of democracy, people have great opportunity to shape their life. Irrespective of their race, class, education, creed, and status, we appeal to every Bhutanese citizen to grasp this great political opportunity, despite being aware of present situation unfolding in Bhutan in which the King is trying to legitimize his draconian old regime under the veil of Democracy. We urge all intellectuals, fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, young and old to exercise this political tool with great care. The right time has arrived and every citizen of Bhutan must exercise this vote to free themselves from oppression. The final decision rests with every individual and DNC urges everyone to participate in this historical opportunity to change their destiny – individual and national. After all, democracy means real power to the people.

Fellow Bhutanese brothers and sister, how long can we continue to live under fear and servitude? Irrespective of our racial roots in the Sharchopa, Naglong or Lhotshampas background, time has come to assert our fundamental rights. We must realize that Bhutan belongs to all of us and not to a single person, community or family. We must rise to this

historical occasion. Sharchopas till now have proved to be very gullible. Therefore, Sharchopas cannot afford to continue living in the realm of *status quo*. Everyone must shape and script his/her own destiny. Whether you are graduates, farmers, businessmen, monks, nuns, gomchens, able or disabled, each must realize that the future of Bhutan rest in his/her hands, especially the youth, as they are the leaders of tomorrow and have to work for a better and peaceful Bhutan. There is ample time for the Kings to amend their machination for the longevity of the institution of monarchy in Bhutan, they still hold the keys. DNC on behalf of the people appeals to the Kings to incorporate the wishes of all sections of society to bring in a successful transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy.

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