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Bhutan: The Widening Fissures within a Fledgling Democracy

By

Dr. Lopamudra Bandyopadhyay*

Introduction

About a year back, the mountainous kingdom of Bhutan, hitherto wrapped in the mists of enlightened isolationism woke up to the filigreed beams of a sun enmeshed in the hues of a democratic system of government. The democracy that was gifted to the Shangri-la of the East was not one that had emerged through a political culture steeped in the same, nor was it a result of an avid euphoria generated by the populace. Rather, and quite unlike other democracies, this particular one was more of a gift of benevolence tendered by a monarchy that had been revered for centuries by a population unsure of its future. One year later, the democracy, far from being infallible, has developed fissures of both political and economic in nature that require the utmost consideration of the government, if they wish to build a stable and prosperous Bhutan, which may in the near future play a pivotal role in the arena of world politics.

* Fellow, Global India Foundation, Kolkata.

This particular paper wishes to embark upon a review of the democratic process in Bhutan, the administrative acumen of the new government under the aegis of a fledgling democratic constitution, and the widening fissures of insurgent and refugee problems that may in the long run prove to be detrimental unless contained in an effective manner.

The Advent of Democracy and the Resultant Constitutional Hiccups

Bhutan's historic venture into the world of democracy commenced on December 31, 2007, when elections to the National Council were held for 15 of the 25 Dzongkhags (districts). Electronic voting machines were used, and the results were announced the very next day. Elections to the National Assembly were held on March 24, 2008, for the election of 57 candidates and shared by only two parties, the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP). The election campaign was rather energetic and devoid of law and order problems. There were neither any profanities expounded upon, nor personal accusations hurled by the candidates at each other. Further, there were no complaints either, save a few on issues of infringement of the electoral code of conduct.

The conduct of the election was surmised to be an extremely bold step taken by Bhutan in an attempt to introduce the democratic tapestry of political culture. The election itself turned out to be quite a subdued event, and it was looked upon more as a friendly match between two contesting parties whose ideologies were not very different from each other. With an impressive turnout of over 79.4 percent, a very high figure for a hilly country with inadequate means of communication, the DTP swept the polls winning 43 of the 47 seats in the first counting. The PDP led by Sangay Ngedup was reduced in strength and it almost seemed as if a single party was governing the country without any opposition. Prime Minister, Jigme Y. Thinley took over the charge of the government on April 9, 2008, and in May 2008, the parliament adopted the draft constitution. Thus, the country progressed from theocracy to monarchy to finally, a two party democratic system.

However, the implementation of the new constitution has not been free from certain minor hiccups. There was a minor constitutional problem with both the Election Commission and the Government attempting to conduct an interim election of the Gups (Administrative Officers) within a very short duration of a few months. This would have resulted in unnecessary expenditure. In a Royal Kasho (Directive) to the Chief Election Commissioner, the Fifth Gyalpo (the King) suggested that the terms of the incumbent Gups be extended until the Election Commission completed the delimitation process. The Royal Kasho was issued after the National Council submitted a report which addressed concerns regarding the recently announced Gup elections.

A related constitutional problem has been the inadequate explanation given to the nature of the relationship shared between the elected Gups and the Gewog administrative officers over their responsibilities. In fact, the functions of the GAO and its relationship with elected Gups and the Gross National Happiness Commission are yet to be properly defined. Further, there has been a feeling that the Gross National Happiness Commission has become an omniscient body extending its reach to all aspects of governance, and that it, with other commissions like the Druk Holding and Investments (DAI), the Royal Civil Service Commission and the National Council (NC) are creating a parallel government. This particular fear has recently been quelled by the Prime Minister of Bhutan at a press conference addressed on the event of the anniversary of the fledgling democracy.

It is not that the constitution has failed the country and its populace; it is merely a phase when a new constitutional document has to grapple with the realities of a country exposed to the intricacies of a political culture alien to its own. The hiccups are few, and may soon be resolved through the proper exercise of governmental and administrative prerogatives.

The Refugee Problem and Maoist Insurgency

The fissures that have been plaguing this happy state of affairs have not been of a miniscule number or temperament. The opposition groups in exile outside Bhutan have termed this version of democracy as incomplete and imperfect. They have alleged that it is neither representative, nor inclusive.

The refugee problem is still very much a factor to contend with. Its inception goes back to 19th century Bhutan. Since the late 1800s, the Lhotshampas (people of Nepali origin) began immigrating to the southern regions of Bhutan, in search of farmland and economic prosperity. Little contact developed between the Drukpas (Buddhist Bhutanese of Tibetan origin) in the north and the Lhotshampas who had settled in the south. Through the years, the Lhotshampas retained their Nepali culture, language and religious traditions, which starkly differed from that of the Drukpas.

By the 1980s, the government had become acutely conscious not just of widespread illegal immigration of people of Nepali origin into Bhutan, but also of the total lack of integration even of long-term immigrants into the political and cultural mainstream of the country. Most of the immigrants knew very little of the culture of Bhutan, and most could not understand the various local languages including Dzongkha. Government officials had hitherto ignored the situation assuming that most of these people who were most often observed in non-Bhutanese clothes were in fact non-Bhutanese visitors or residents. Perceiving this growing dichotomy as a threat to national unity, the Government promulgated directives in the 1980s that sought to preserve Bhutan's cultural identity as well as to formally embrace the citizens of other ethnic groups in a *One Nation One People* policy. This policy required citizens to wear the attire of the northern Bhutanese in public places and reinforced the status of Dzongkha as the national language. Nepali was discontinued as a subject in the schools thus bringing it at par with the status of the other languages of Bhutan, none of which are taught.

In 1985, the government passed a new Citizenship Act that clarified and attempted to enforce the 1958 Citizenship Act in order to control the flood of illegal immigration. In 1988 the government conducted its first real census exercise. The basis for the census findings was the 1958 cut off year, the year that the Nepali population had first received Bhutanese citizenship. Those individuals who could not provide proof of residency prior to 1958 were adjudged to be illegal immigrants. The government however failed to properly train the census officials and this led to some tension among the public.

Matters reached a climax in September 1990 after groups of 10,000 or more ethnic Nepalese people from the Indian side of the border, organised protest marches in different districts, burned down schools, stripped local government officials of their national attire which they burned publicly, carried out kidnappings, and murders of other ethnic Nepalese people who did not join their protests. Some of the organisers of the marches were arrested and detained. They were led by the Bhutan People's Party, a militant group. However the Bhutanese government later released most of them. Those responsible for the murders and kidnappings were forced to leave the country. The refugee problem still continues to plague Bhutan, and during the recent times an added hindrance has been the Maoist insurgency movement that has spread to the refugee camps.

During the recent times, Bhutan has been a victim of sporadic violence perpetrated by Maoist forces within and outside the country. The latest incident took place when two soldiers from the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) were injured in an explosion suspected to be carried out by Maoist militants from camps in Nepal. The explosion took place on October 12, 2009, in Gaden village in Sarpang. The improvised explosive device was planted in a bunker which was usually manned during the day by the RBA outpost personnel at Umling. The militants who planted the device also took away two rifles. Several other incidents of a similar nature have pointed the finger of accusation at the Maoists illegally crossing over from Nepal, as well as those Maoists who have taken shelter in the refugee camps. In 2003, similar insurgency problems had threatened to shatter the peace of the mountainous kingdom, but Operation All Clear launched by the

Royal Bhutan Army and led by the Fourth Gyalpo had wiped out the same. The operation had met with a resounding success, and such similar operations may be carried out in the near future if the Bhutanese government wishes to annihilate the insurgency problem permanently.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be stated that although the Bhutanese government is at present facing challenges from various quarters, still the contributions rendered during its one year tenure have been quite impressive, both on the political as well on the economic front. The Ministry of Economic Affairs in its report to the cabinet has strongly advocated that the country should join the WTO. The financial services of the country are being brought under the direct supervision of the central bank – the Royal Monetary Authority, with a financial act approved by the government. The aim of this act is to prevent any financial crisis from becoming a serious one, especially in a country with limited resources such as Bhutan; make Bhutan a regional financial centre, and last, but not the least, to have international standards for financial institutions.

The Kuensel, in one of its editorials has stated that the government, which is the custodian of democracy in Bhutan, should start questioning if the masses do understand the system of democracy. It should begin inculcating the ideals of democracy within the Bhutanese psyche, hitherto familiar with a monarchical form of government. It has urged the government to familiarise the people with the Constitution, the electoral procedure, and the host of legislations, policies and regulations that are new to many. Perhaps, it is only when democracy percolates down to the level of the ordinary citizen shall the true democratic spirit of Bhutan evolve, and ensure that the democracy thus nurtured strengthens the body politic of the nation.

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