

# Bhutan

## Cements Its Democracy

By Dr. Paul Richardson\*

**A**t the end of June the picturesque Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan held its first ever local elections. Over recent years this tiny country of around 700,000 has been undergoing a remarkable political transition and these were only the third nation-wide polls since Bhutan's revered Fourth King, Jigme Sengay Wangchuk, decreed in 2006 that Bhutan was to become a democratic state. Somewhat ironically, the majority of Bhutan's citizens were at first against the transition from absolute monarchy to democracy, yet, they have proved to be quick to adapt to the new reality.

Prior to the elections on 27<sup>th</sup> June, candidates came to village meeting places across their district in order to present their policies and field questions from local residents. With only a 60% literacy rate, these me-

etings are vital to the democratic process. On the day itself voters could not cast their ballot without wearing the national dress and every shop, restaurant, bar and business were ordered shut down for the day. The all powerful electoral commission also insisted that until voting had finished at 5pm it would be a dry day.

During the campaigning, the biggest difference to emerge between candidates seemed to be not policy but education versus experience. Many former representatives were up for re-election and were challenged by ex-monks or younger, well-educated candidates. As the election results unfolded, both new and old candidates had gained majorities and this split reflects the changes taking place across Bhutanese society: the challenge of bringing Bhutan



into the modern world through economic development while at the same time preserving cultural traditions.

To overcome this tension the idea of Gross National Happiness (GNH) has become somewhat of a national ideology. GNH has been promoted by the Fourth King since the 1970s as an alternative to GNP and is a kind of fusion of sustainable development, environmental protection and egalitarianism. Whether experienced or inexperienced, virtually all candidates sought to emphasise their loyalty to the GNH concept.

However, despite the fan-fare over GNH, Bhutan is not without its problems and behind its quaintness and the novelty of electoral politics, many of its people live in extreme poverty. To the consternation of the government, just days before the polls opened, Bhutan was classified as a failed state by Foreign Policy Magazine, a journal published by the American Think Tank 'Fund for Peace'. The long shadow of Nepalese refugees who fled persecution in the early 1990s, and more recently the banning of all tobacco products (complete with punitive prison sentences

for violators of the new law), as well as the fact that virtually all major businesses are connected via family ties to the monarchy or through corporations to the state, present a somewhat striking contrast to the recent arrival of democracy. The country's significant community of Buddhist monks are also excluded from the democratic process and are barred from both standing and voting in these elections.

Nevertheless, the seriousness with which the eligible voters, candidates and the electoral commission conducted themselves last June represented an extraordinary moment in Bhutan's modern history. Some observers thought that the arrival of elections was merely a ritual to appease foreign donors and a means for the monarchy to keep ruling in a different way. Instead, it seems that many Bhutanese are realising that how they vote can influence their destiny. Although heavily influenced by its southern neighbour (India even provided electoral machines on polling day), Bhutan seems to be forging an electoral politics in its own mould. Guided by the monarchy, there are new rules to the game of politics in Bhutan and politicians and voters are quickly learning them. When electricity, roads and sewerage are still far from universal, political decisions can have an immense significance on everyday life.

As people get used to listening to political debates and questions on the radio, TV, or in the village meeting place, what was promised during election campaigns comes under serious scrutiny. In this quiet corner of the world, sandwiched between India to the south and China to the north, a genuine evolution towards some form of democracy is taking place. It remains to be seen how much, and in what ways, it will change the country but what seems assured is that in one of the world's most isolated states the relationship between government, society and monarchy is being altered forever. **PR**

**Note:**

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