

Bhutan: A democratic facade to hide oppression

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If you've read what the mainstream media has had to say about Bhutan in the last year then you would probably have a strong impression of Bhutan and its government: a monarchy that has "given up its power" and embraced democracy.

You would probably know of a government that has chosen to strive for "gross national happiness" rather than straining towards a Western-style consumer society.

Looking past this highly successful public relations campaign by the Bhutanese monarchy, however, reveals a very different picture.

Bhutan has a population of 680,000 people. However according to United Nations Human Rights Commission, 100,000 ethnic Nepalese have been forced to out of Bhutan and into refugee camps in Nepal since the early 1990s. The government systematically discriminates against the remaining ethnic Nepali population.

A 2005 government census labelled 13% of the population within Bhutan as "non-nationals", thus denying them any rights, including the right to vote.

Pro-democracy uprisings in 1985, largely among the southern Nepali population, were suppressed by the royal government. The Nepali population have been viewed as a threat to the monarchy.

The Hindu religion was banned and only Bhutanese dress, dialect and customs were legal. The entire Nepali cultural identity was outlawed. Freedom of the press was closed and foreign tourism curtailed to try and limit outside influences.

To the concern of the regime, the Nepali population continued to grow at a faster rate than that of the ethnic Bhutanese.

A radical democratic movement was still active and growing in strength, fuelled now by civil rights claims against ethnic oppression.

The government changed the citizenship requirements. Only granted citizenship to Nepalis who could prove their citizenship with "registration" papers from the ministry of home affairs dating back prior to 1958 were granted citizenship — despite the fact that the ministry not being created until 1968.

In 1988, the monarchy launched a new crackdown on the Nepali population, especially political activists. Up to 100,000 people, more than 15% of entire population, were expelled, imprisoned or killed.

It was an epic, under-reported, ethnic cleansing. The lack of coverage of this outrage in the Western media made its fawning coverage of December 2007 and March 2008 "democratic" elections even more insulting.

The accepted media line revolved around how encouraging and refreshing to see a “benevolent dictator” give up some of his powers for the good of modernising the country.

However, the elections had no credibility as being genuinely democratic. With almost a sixth of the country living in exile and another 13% disenfranchised, only two political parties, both staunchly royalist, were allowed to participate.

The king and a number of his representatives are unelected representatives to the assembly. Only those with higher education qualifications were permitted to stand for election to the upper house.

As public education at an elementary level is largely unavailable, this drastically limits participation to the narrow and privileged grouping around the monarchy.

The voting system was rigged to make the outcome a foregone conclusion and the oppression of the Nepali and other minorities was always going to continue unchallenged.

The United Nations has finally formulated a resettlement program for the Nepali refugees. The governments of the US, Australia and some European countries have agreed to resettle the refugees.

While this is solution is far better than languishing in the camps, it is still far from ideal. The overwhelming majority of the refugees want to return to homeland in Bhutan — one that is genuinely democratic and without discrimination.

P.S.

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