

Bhutan Learns to Vote

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A remote Buddhist kingdom prepares for an experiment in electoral politics with an April 21 dress rehearsal before the big day.

Bhutan, the tiny Himalayan kingdom sandwiched between Nepal, India and China, is off on a new adventure. Dragon King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, who abdicated from the throne in December after 37 years in power, wants to incorporate democracy into gross national happiness, the measure of prosperity he invented in the 1980s for his isolated country.

After centuries as an absolute monarchy, Jigme, the fourth representative of the current dynasty which came to power in 1907, directed the Land of the Thunder Dragon to try multiparty democracy. Mock elections are scheduled for Saturday, April 21 as a dress rehearsal for the real thing next year.

But not everyone is thrilled with the prospects of democracy. "We have heard about the polls on the Indian side," a middle-aged woman trader in Phuentsholing, an India town bordering Bhutan, told Asia Sentinel. "Sometimes, unexpected incidents also come out with the elections. We do not want those here in Bhutan. After all, we are a peace-loving nation."

In Bhutan, she added, "Today we have no strikes. Everything is on schedule. But there is lots of news about bandhs (strikes) in India that even take innocent lives. I am even scared of thinking such incidents will follow democracy in our kingdom."

The electoral exercise for this Buddhist nation of fewer than 600,000 is the latest step in a liberalization process that began in the 1980s, when Jigme determined that his isolated kingdom's measure of prosperity should be gross national happiness — GNH — rather than gross national product, or GNP.

Prosperity would be balanced against the health of Bhutan's natural environment, its people and its culture. So far, as reported by a wide variety of western publications goggle-eyed at a seemingly backward country whose policies appear to make considerable sense, Bhutan under Jigme's guidance — his 26 year old bachelor son is the current Dragon King — appears to be making considerable sense.

The constituencies for the National Assembly have already been demarcated. The new Election Commission has geared up for the mock election on April 21 with another round scheduled for May 28.

"The total number of voters is estimated at 400,626, where 884 polling centers have been set up," Dasho Kunzang Wangdi, chief election commissioner (CEC) told local journalists.

The remote, crag-studded kingdom, stippled with spectacular Buddhist monasteries, was locked away from visitors for centuries until Jigme, who took the throne in 1972, decided to open it up about 20 years ago. It has no daily newspapers and only a single television station that began broadcasting in 1999.

Weekly newspapers based in the capital, Thimpu, reported that “on April 21, four dummy political parties, namely Druk Red Party, Druk Blue Party, Druk Green Party and Druk Yellow Party with different symbols and colors will participate in the preliminary round of polls.”

School students are supposed to stand as mock candidates. The votes are to be tabulated by electronic voting machines, something many more advanced democracies don't yet have. The student candidates are campaigning and distributing manifestoes. Polling will be 9 am to 5 pm. Polling and counting officers, observers and security personnel have been assigned to help officials prepare for next year's real election.

The transition from monarchy to democracy began five years ago when Jigme empowered a council of ministers. In 2004, he disclosed a 34-point constitution to be subjected to a referendum, following which it is to replace the present regime. The progress towards democratization is taking place in the absence of riots or other messy insurrections, as for instance took place in nearby Nepal, forcing the monarchy to cede power in 2006. Next year there will be a prime minister and a parliament.

Last December, Jigme stunned his subjects by agreeing to abdicate immediately in favor of his eldest son, Crown Prince Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuk, who at the time was 26 and is now the world's youngest head of state. Namgyal, as he is known, is a bachelor.

The king made his declaration in front of a crowd of nearly 8,000 monks, farmers and students at a remote village, abruptly announcing that “Chhoetse Penlop (Bhutanese for the crown prince) will be enthroned as the Fifth Druk Gyalpo (Dragon King).”

The Bhutanese were mostly astonished. Jigme Singhe Wangchuk had ruled for a full 37 years and remains phenomenally popular. But he had carefully groomed Namgyal to rule as a constitutional monarch. After completing his schooling in Bhutan, he graduated from Wheaton College in the United States, earned a master's degree in politics at Oxford and also studied at the National Defence College of India.

Underlining his vision of a modern Bhutan that would combine democracy and a constitutional monarchy, Namgyal argued in a recent public address that his country may not have economic or military might, but should continue to develop its real assets – the people. He also argued that Bhutan's precarious geopolitical location could be turned to advantage, much as Switzerland, another mountainous land, has prospered between Germany, France and Italy.

“Some say we are a country landlocked between giant neighbors. We are aware of that disadvantage but in building a strong economy, our geopolitical location is going to be our biggest advantage,” he told the graduates of Sherubtse College in Kanglung earlier this month. The king also termed India a close friend.

“As the world's largest democracy, our young democratic system will always benefit from India's experience. As an economic power of the future, our economy will only benefit from cooperation with India,” Namgyal asserted.

Meanwhile, the Bhutan election commission is spreading the democracy message. The local weeklies are getting rich off advertisements from the election commission and the television channel is also carrying ads urging the importance of voting.

But while the king is comfortable with his big neighbor, India is something of an issue here. The arrival of Hindi television programming beaming across the border from India bothers some intellectuals.

“We are worried that Indian channels are hijacking our prime time. We have even had to reschedule our news bulletins following popular Indian serials,” said a Thimphu based journalist. “Similarly we are worried about a series of bad elements of India that could penetrate to Bhutan after democracy is installed here.”

Next year they can debate those relations with India in parliament.

P.S.

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