

**BHUTAN – 1907-2008: A CENTURY IN SEARCH OF
NATIONAL IDENTITY AND CULTURAL SECURITY**

SHAW, Brian C.*
ÇİN/CHINA/КИТАЙ

ABSTRACT

Bhutan's landed, bureaucratic and religious elites agreed on 17 December 1907 to establish a perpetual monarchy to bring an end to frequent sectarian bickering and warfare. During the following century, it was not until external events threatened to engulf the region that the complex issues of survival gained foremost place in the minds of the country's leaders. Indeed, only during less than a half-century – the 46 years from 1962 – have leaders been increasingly devoted to these matters, with necessary urgency.

This paper attempts to review major developments and consequences during these past 50 years in particular, to seek out the strengths and weaknesses of social and public policy circumstances, in the face of local and regional threats and pressures that were initially seen to be unclear and with uncertain depth and timeliness of consequence.

The analysis is from a perspective of international relations, broadly conceived, in which domestic circumstances are a major factor for decisions, and in which borders are traditionally seen as flexible and in many ways of seasonal validity.

Overall, looking at constitutional changes now taking place in Bhutan, the search for security is necessarily linked to the development of “democracy with Bhutan characteristics”, and both the strengths and the weaknesses of the traditional consensus decision-making and the traditional conciliation of differences are assessed against factors eroding the basis for success of these techniques.

In this brief paper I give only an overview, as a “draft interpretative essay”, and then only from one perspective, and of only some aspects of complex change in what is today the kingdom of Bhutan. In essence, a collectivity of villages and districts was brought from a semi-medieval complex of circumstances – where life for many was “brutish and short” – to the verge of a new set of possibilities. More specifically, the establishment and growth of a

* Dr., Honorary Research Fellow, Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong. e-mail: bcjshaw@hkucc.hku.hk.

modern education system, establishment and enhancement of health services, the development of roads from bridle paths, the arrival of contemporary modes of communication and a basis for a slowly-developing sense of “public ownership” of civil and economic life has been laid. This small group of people in relatively remote valleys were able to evolve their own relatively stable relationships within the village, the valley, and the wider community, and prepare a basis for community action in times of war, drought or flood. Rules were developed and in general held, especially the notion of consensus, whereby public issues were engaged publicly and at length until there was indeed a meeting of minds. It was understood that all would be bound by the conclusions reached, even if bitterly opposed during the preceding debate, if one was to remain within the community and enjoy its benefits. This concept of unity and consensus is very important in the broader context of a strong individualism within these communities. Individual space was sacrosanct, inviolate, yielding only to the representatives of civil order and the monastic authorities whose cooperation was useful and indeed essential at times.

But this is only a beginning for the unfolding of human potential, whether we speak of economic, intellectual, political, or even religious development. Villagers whose whole lives were formerly essentially framed within a hand-to-mouth subsistence existence now begin to see new vistas for their children and grandchildren. Those vistas are still blurred, and the needed clarity requires more time and experience (including experience of mistakes and failures). In a sense, the challenges and achievements to date of “change” in the past one hundred years have been to extend the boundaries of the people’s consciousness, to give them awareness of a status as “citizens”, and to prepare the possibilities for enhancing human sensibility.

Bhutan lies between what is now the Tibet region of China and what is now the independent republic of India. Its largely mountainous terrain encouraged acceptance by the people of comfort from the tenets of the Buddhist faith, and the difficulty of communications in the first five decades of the 20th century discouraged foreign adventures from either of the large neighbours, themselves undergoing political and other changes.

Bhutan had a history of central authority from at least the 17th century, but that authority was often challenged by local leaders, especially in the decades before 1907. The last decades of the 19th century in particular saw a series of wasteful and inconclusively competitive “mini-wars” for territorial and especially economic authority. With some assistance from representatives from (then) British India, major representatives of the clergy and local clans were persuaded in 1907 to elect one of their number as a hereditary king; this arrangement was largely respected by all parties in the ensuing decades, but there was little development of the country’s resources. Indeed, to the contrary, especially during the reign of the Second King in the 1930’s and early 1940’s, the Royal Court expanded the number of attached functionaries and newly-

created administrative roles. The levy of taxes needed to maintain the court also dramatically increased the burden on the people. A series of cobwebbed rituals were elaborated around the court and to a certain extent entwined and supported the religious order almost as an extension of the “state”. The rejection of what some might see as parasitism on the society of both the court and the clergy, and its replacement-by goals of a socially useful clergy and of a transparent and accountable civil authority- was an important part of the world-changing views of the third king, well accepted as the “father of modern Bhutan”. He was not able to achieve all of his goals before his untimely demise in 1972. His son – the fourth king – came to the throne at an early age, and needed time to discern his own thinking and ways of being true to his father’s dreams in the face of a variety of self-interested regional and foreign challenges.

The above is a grossly over-simple background to more recent developments. The Fourth King had the political task of further refining the goal of a strong and unified country, while dealing with, and accommodating or reflecting the interests of advisers whose assumptions and goals were not necessarily similar to his own. That this task was one of great complexity is shown by the fact that it took almost 25 years before the Fourth King could decide that the way was sufficiently prepared to embark on a unique “democratic path” for Bhutan with acceptable chances of success.

A major motivation for contemporary state-building has been national survival of this entity called “Bhutan”, even at a time when the “state characteristics” and sense of civil society had not been fully formed – borders had not been (and are still not) fully agreed with the large neighbouring states, and a sense of patriotism (although encouraged by the education system) was still imperfect. It was also necessary to bring the monk body out of its meditative role and into a new, more constructive and positive relationship with the people, through a more formal education and improved discipline of the monk body. In addition, it was a clear certainty for the fourth king that all changes affecting the livelihood of the people should not be undertaken except with their tacit or express support. (Parenthetically, one may note that the planned move to “electoral democracy” in 2008 was not accompanied by enthusiasm of the people, as evidenced by their responses at a series of local meetings arranged during 2006 and 2007: the majority seemed to have the view that they saw little need to change the existing situation of a benign leadership by the monarch, but would, reluctantly and tentatively, accede to the advice of their leader concerning the proposed new system of governance.)

The country has a small population, which on 31 May 2005 (the first full-fledged census day) was 672,425 out of which 37,443 were floating population. The actual resident population of Bhutan as per the definition of the PHCB 2005, enumerated on the census days [30-31 May 2005] was 634,982 persons, out of which 333,595 persons (52.5 %) were males and 301,387 persons (47.5 %) were females. The sex ratio of the resident population was 111 males per 100 females.

The urban population consisted of 196,111 persons (30.9 %) of the total population, while 438,871 (69.1 %) were in the rural areas. During the twelve months prior to the census, there were a total of 12,538 live births and 4,498 deaths, giving a natural growth rate of 1.3 %. Given this data, one may see that the population of the country in the early years of the 20th century would have been very small indeed.

It is important to note the development of the notion of “gross national happiness” by administrators, picking up a theme of the fourth king that “gross national happiness [GNH] is more important than gross national product”, has come to characterise much of the rationale of development in Bhutan in recent years. The fourth king’s theme has been similar to the current Thai king’s concern with “sufficiency economics”: both monarchs attempted to focus administrator’s minds to the enhancement of long-term benefit for the community. The task of elaborating the details of GNH and of translating these to practical policies has fallen on Bhutan’s Planning Commission (recently renamed GNH Commission):

Having accepted that the maximization of Gross National Happiness is a philosophy and objective of the country’s development, it was necessary to more clearly identify the main areas, which would most contribute towards furthering this philosophy and objective. Recognizing that a wide range of factors contribute to human well-being and happiness and that it may not be possible to fully and exhaustively define or list everything for the purpose of its development planning, the country has identified four major areas as the main pillars of Gross National Happiness. These are economic growth and development, preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, preservation and sustainable use of the environment, and good governance.

– From Ninth Five Year Plan document, chapter 3

Bhutan is the only country pursuing the “unique and profound” concept of Gross National Happiness. This concept is now taken as the foundation of Bhutan’s approach to development. The ultimate goal of development in Bhutan is to maximize happiness of the people, which seeks to take into account the values of spiritual and emotional needs more than just satisfying material needs. GNH comprises four goals; economic self reliance, environmental preservation, cultural promotion and good governance, which are “mutually linked, complementary and consistent” and “embody national values, aesthetics and spiritual traditions”.

Benefits of GNH include the following:

- The concept is a Bhutanese idea, which helps strengthen Bhutan’s individual identity (“Brand Bhutan”) in the international realm;
- The concept can have a theoretical link or bridge between the past religious tradition and the secular future

- It seques to a concept of “cultural industry” as expressed in the 10th Five-Year Plan 2008-2013.

Note, however, that the religious authorities have no place in the new constitutional arrangements. However, new regulations adopted in July 2007 (notably a Religious Organisations Act) allow for registration of an executive oversight body on which the government of the day will have its representatives, so that the linkage between secular and religious institutions is not broken.

Bhutan’s Tenth Plan asserts that while the people will witness momentous socio-political change, “our development philosophy of maximizing Gross National Happiness will still hold true and its four pillars will continue to form the core values for the Tenth Plan. In view of the significant proportion of people living below the national poverty line and the incompatibility of such a situation with the principles of Gross National Happiness, the Government has decided that poverty reduction will be the main development goal for the Tenth Plan. Given this focus, all sectors should formulate programmes and projects that target the poor, the vulnerable and the unreached.”

There are several unusual features of Bhutan’s “democratic constitution”:

- Art 3 – spiritual heritage – “Buddhism is the spiritual heritage of Bhutan, which promotes among others the principles of peace, non-violence, compassion and tolerance. The [king] is the protector of all religions in Bhutan”, while religious institutions and personalities “shall remain above politics”

- Art 4 – Culture – The state has obligation to support the preservation of “the cultural heritage of the country”, and “The State shall recognize culture as an evolving dynamic force and shall endeavour to strengthen and facilitate the continued evolution of traditional values and institutions that are sustainable as a progressive society.”

- Art 5 – Environment – “Every Bhutanese is a trustee of the Kingdom’s natural resources and environment for the benefit of the present and future generations and it is the fundamental duty of every citizen to contribute to the protection of the natural environment...”; “The Government shall ensure that, in order to conserve the country’s natural resources ... a minimum of sixty percent of Bhutan’s total land shall be maintained under forest cover for all time.”

- Only two political parties are allowed to compete in the final elections for 47 seats in the National Assembly – although there is no limit to the number of parties in pre-final electoral contest; 25 non-party seats (one seat for each of 20 administrative districts, plus five “appointed” by the king) are established for the National Council (upper house of parliament).

- Candidates must be recognised first degree graduates

- Political parties will have their election costs paid from the public purse
- Representatives are to have a 5-year term of office
- Party members, upon election, may not defect to another party.
- The monarch must retire at 65

CONCLUSION

During the first 100 years of monarchy in Bhutan, significant engagement with the world has occurred only in the past 45 years or so.

The commitment to popular “secret” elections as a basis for governance is a relatively novel development – but selection of leaders by consensus has a long and (mostly) honourable history.

The process of elections by itself is no guarantor of good governance, especially when resting on a tradition of consensus decision-making allied with the (over-riding) decisions or directions of an absolute monarchy – however benevolent. Bhutanese have been accustomed to look to a single person at the apex of power who can resolve all injustices and unfairness.

The internal strengthening of civil society must be based on growing mechanisms for accountability, allied to transparency of public policy. The further implication is the desirability of a stronger “free press” and access to broader and deeper education for the population of all ages.

The circumstances of Bhutan society “at present” are by no means ideal for “party politics” as understood in some more “developed” societies. But the principle of choice is being established and will be further refined.

“Democracy with Bhutanese characteristics” is still raw clay; the potters are still under apprenticeship, but are intelligent and resourceful. An important aspect of Bhutan’s democratic experience is the continuing leading role of the monarch, who has come to be seen as the principal distributor of *kidu*. One may say that the hoped-for evolution to “democracy with Bhutanese characteristics” at present is a complex enterprise laid underneath (or indeed perhaps on top of) “kidu democracy”, itself necessarily a work in progress, but with a history of proto-democracy in the consensus model of decision-making at all levels in the past. Kidu (as in mutual aid, self-help, cooperative) democracy is the acknowledgment by those in authority of a moral obligation to assist those others with a legitimate call on the “surplus” or latent collective resources of the state. The monarchy’s past role of bringing strength and sustenance to a people at times of confusion, pain or loss will not be at all diminished in the future. One may see the further unfolding and refining of the democratic impulse in Bhutan as a constantly enabling and mutually supportive process between the monarchy, elected politicians, and able assistants in ranks of the civil [society’s] servants.

- If the “democratic experiment” does not succeed for whatever reason, Bhutan’s longer-term fate must be to be subsumed by either (or in part by both) of the great neighbours, India and China. One cannot assume benevolent friendship forever, and Bhutan’s resources are limited. Therefore, it is most essential that the “democratic experiment” does “succeed”, even if the parameters of “democracy with Bhutanese characteristics” are different from (or even quite unlike) those in other polities.
- In this broadest sense, Bhutan is like all other countries, and unlike any of them: a small conglomeration of peoples with customs and beliefs in common, a fragile life-style (note the risks of earthquakes, the limited area of usable land), in recent decades accustomed to the sole leadership of a king who foresees problems and attends to the unpredictable. Now the peoples have to accommodate to being ruled by their own selected representatives, with all of their individual shortcomings and dreams.
- The subtle adjustment of international relations becomes the umbrella under which the self-strengthening of the state can take place. Buddhist states do not have a tradition of surviving the pressures from more power-oriented neighbours in times of developing conflict. The future belongs to the (educated) youth here as elsewhere; yet the new developing circumstances open up the possibilities for creative approaches to problematic issues that will arise and to some extent can be foreseen.
- The chances of survival are becoming better than before: but require even more concentration, knowledge, institutional support than in the past. The next century offers greater possibilities for a small state to gain greater respect internationally and thereby “help” secure “the goal of GNH” in its broadest sense.

