

## **How to Reform a Traditional Buddhist Monarchy**



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The Political Achievements of His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck,  
the Fourth King of Bhutan (1972-2006)

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## **Introduction**

His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck acceded to the Golden Throne at the age of 17 in 1972 after the sudden death of his father His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, the Third King of Bhutan. When he was formally crowned on June 2, 1974, he became the youngest monarch in the world. On December 14, 2006, at the age of 51, he announced his immediate abdication and the transfer of the throne to his eldest son Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, two years before initially planned. It was the first time in world history that a monarch, who was initially vested with absolute powers, voluntarily reduced the scope of these powers and eventually abdicated with no other reason than his own dedication to political reforms. His reign was unique considering not only the conditions of his accession to the throne and departure, but also the contents of the policies he conducted during more than thirty years of his reign.

Bhutan is one of the least developed countries in the world. Yet it has become not only a living conservatory of the Buddhist culture, but also a laboratory for political reform in a traditional society. This is unique in the world and most significant in the Himalayan region where local polities, when confronted to major

challenges as experienced in Sikkim in the 1970s and as currently seen in Nepal in a totally different context, have never succeeded in modernising themselves without disruptive consequences both for the society and the political structures.

Contrary to Huntington's general predicaments that "the struggle between a pro-status quo traditional elite and a pro-change modernising elite is likely to be fatal to any monarchical system lacking the western European political-cultural background" (Huntington, 1968, also see Rose, 1977), the process of political modernization has not been fatal to the monarchical system in Bhutan. On the contrary, the monarch has been the main agent of modernization as demonstrated during the reign of the Fourth King. His abdication has even enhanced the legitimacy of his dynasty whose founder had been elected more than a century ago.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, reform in Bhutan has not followed usual patterns generally observed in other parts of the world. The Fourth King's main historical legacy might not be only the changes he allowed in his country, but also his willingness to promote genuine Bhutanese ways and means towards modernization. The democratisation process has been carefully thought and prepared throughout his reign.

Although Bhutan can still be seen as a conservative polity according to western standards, the present paper intends to demonstrate that the reign of Fourth King of Bhutan was a decisive though progressive march towards reform both from social, political, and diplomatic points of view.

### **Bhutan Political Society: Entering the 21st Century**

One of the basic problems in Bhutan, as far as political reform is concerned, is that the people have neither been ready so far to spontaneously welcome changes that have been introduced by the monarchy nor have they been organised to provoke these changes themselves. Bhutanese society is essentially conservative. In that context the first achievements of the Fourth King have been to inject the germs of reform into the minds of people.

When he ascended to the throne, Bhutan was still an isolated country with a conservative and traditionalist polity. Indeed the Third King had initiated most significant and substantial reforms between 1952 and 1972 in the political, diplomatic, social and economic spheres. None of the changes occurring during the last thirty years would have been possible without going through this period. Yet those reforms had little impact on the way the general populace was able to picture itself as an actor of modernization.

Its political consciousness has always been very low. The politicisation process that had significant impact on large sections of the population in other South Asian countries had not mobilised Bhutanese crowds, except for Nepali Bhutanese in the southern districts.

Various factors can explain this situation. Bhutan's ability to insulate itself over many decades from the influence of social and political forces that dominated South Asia had been decisive. Also a determinant had been the low level of education of the average population whose priorities had stood out of the political sphere. The existence of a ruling elite, largely unchallenged by adverse forces, and willingness to keep the initiative leadership as far as modernisation is concerned, had prevented the emergence of organised factional politics. Eventually, consensus politics, which has been one of the major characteristics of Bhutanese traditional society, had provided little scope for popular participation in the decision-making process, apart from organised decentralisation.

None of the reforms bestowed by the Fourth King would be significant without mentioning their social and political context. This leads us to consider two major factors of any

democratisation process: ideology and social mobilization. Although important challenges remain ahead regarding these two essential issues, the contribution of the Fourth King has been decisive to help Bhutan enter into a new political era.

### **Gross National Happiness: Inventing a Cohesive National Ideology**

Theocratic tradition prevailing before the institution of the monarchy in 1907 provided little ideological support to the new regime other than religious principles. The ruling elite has never complied with any dogmatic approach and political rhetoric has been little stultifying. After Bhutan opened to the outside world beginning in the 1960s, the official rhetoric tended to be modernist in content, due to the influence of foreign patterns, essentially coming from India, and to the requirements of development. Bhutan has never classified itself in terms of socialist or liberal policies, although egalitarianism occasionally manifests in public statements. The country lacked a mobilizing concept that could symbolise both the people's aspiration and the government's endeavours.

The Fourth King has filled this gap by coining the term Gross National Happiness (GNH). He has made an explicit commitment

to preserve Bhutan's cultural heritage and natural environment while formulating national goals and policies not only on the basis of socio-economic progress and Gross Domestic Product (GDP), but also by taking into account less quantifiable factors like spiritual well-being of the people. He has also engaged the country in a politicisation process. Philosophical by content, GNH has become an ideological vector. It has been participating, to some extent, to the progressive political maturation of the people who have been given the opportunity to view modern advancement in the context of genuine sustainable human development rather than just income growth.

This approach has been inspired by traditional principles like conciliation, pragmatism and compassion. The welfare of the public is a modern version of Buddhist doctrine (fundamental need for harmony in human relations). Although the concept was first introduced in the 1980s, the term has been "a popularisation of the distinct Bhutanese perception of the fundamental purpose of development which can be traced throughout the period of development." (Priesner, 1999). The tendency to describe this concept with reference to the Buddhist cosmology (Thinley, 1999) is clear evidence of its ideological content. Among the main features of that ideology, the importance of environment

preservation is also inherited from Buddhist values. The role of welfare state, through a paternalist approach of political organisation is a prolongation of the feudal organisation that prevailed in traditional self-sufficient local communities. This concept has proved so far to be a rather cohesive national ideology, which has been a factor for legitimising the monarchy. It has provided a coherent political basis to the regime, which is rather new to Bhutan. It has also laid the basis of what could be future Bhutanese politics including a more active pros and cons system. As demonstrated throughout various seminars and papers, (Ura, et al, 1999). GNH has created a comprehensive framework to structure potentially substantive political and social debates around four essential platforms: economic development, environmental preservation, cultural promotion and good governance.

Although there is a certain degree of incompatibility between the western derived rhetoric relating to politicisation and Bhutanese practice, since the former may be irrelevant to the latter, it can be argued that the development of a nationalist ideology in Bhutan has been the first step of a broader process which has started to influence all sectors of the society, including those, like Bhutanese of Nepalese origin, who have expressed doubts about

certain aspects of the cultural promotion. The essence of an ideology is to promote a structured and coherent social and political model that can be exposed to criticism within or without the model. So far, GHN has had this function.

**Social Mobilization: National Integration Versus Public Mobilization**

The Fourth King had shown clear evidence of his willingness to make such a debate possible in the long-term. Yet he had to take into account the level of political consciousness of his people and potential internal sources of conflict. This is why his moves have been cautious and progressive. While judging his democratic records, one should never forget that his objective had been to prevent the disruption of Bhutan's unique cultural and social heritage based on consensus. As shown in neighbouring Nepal, modernization can have dramatic consequences on a traditional polity if the monarchy, which is the symbol of this polity, is not able to incarnate consensus-building and progressive reform.

National integration is part of this process, particularly in the Himalayan region where many ethnic tensions have been observed during the past thirty years. One of the main challenges the Fourth King had to face during his reign was the nation-

building process which experienced major threats both on internal and external fronts with the intensification of communal tensions that questioned national unity and cultural identity. Although the Northern Bhutanese culture associated with the Drukpa tradition is dominant, the kingdom is multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-lingual. The national integration was generally considered a success in Bhutan where all the minorities could enjoy their own culture within the mainstream of the Bhutanese society. During the 1980s, some sections of the Lhotshampa (Nepali) minority started to view the national integration process as being detrimental to their identity, and homogenisation resulting from modernisation as leading to the exclusive domination of the Drukpa culture. The declaration of Dzongkha as the only national language, the termination of Nepali in schools, the promulgation of a code of etiquette (*Driglam Namzha*) and the identification of illegal immigrants through census operations were assimilated to a “Bhutanisation” process whose only purpose was to favour the culturally and politically dominant group. This perception has been amplified by differences existing between Lhotshampa and other ethnic communities in terms of political consciousness. Contrary to the Drukpa society, people of the Nepali origin have been exposed to politics at least from the beginning of the 1950s,

when the roots of ethnic dissent in Bhutan can be traced. Political developments in Sikkim during the early 1970s, the entrenchment of Gorkha militancy in the Darjeeling Hills during the early 1980s and political upheavals in Nepal from 1989 contributed to a greater politicisation of the people of the Nepali origin and to the exacerbation of the crisis that led to the departure of thousands of people from the southern district of Bhutan to refugees camps in Eastern Nepal.

Although the problem in Southern Bhutan has been largely mitigated, the presence of large minority groups, which were allegedly disenfranchised under the hereditary monarchy (Dhakal & Strawn, 1994, pp.133-34) was problematic for the regime. The Lhotshampa issue can be interpreted to some extent as the first significant challenge to the GNH ideology as people of the Nepali origin seriously questioned some aspects of the policy of cultural promotion like *Driglam Namzha* which they consider as a revival of traditional Bhutanese culture. Some factors like the ideological influence from India, especially the radical one like Naxalism, and from Nepal with the potential impact of the Maoist Movement, have probably contributed to the growing dissent in southern districts. Some groups have been attracted towards the radical ideas prevailing in the adjoining Indian provinces of

Assam and West Bengal. During the 1980s the growing success of ideas like overthrowing the monarchy in Nepal had been an inspiration for some dissidents of the Nepali origin in Bhutan to remove the monarchical system of Bhutan too. The potential nexus between ULFA Bodo outfits and Bhutanese refugees that eventually led to military action against Indian insurgents lodged in Bhutanese territory, might also have compelled Bhutan to mellow its rigid attitude on the issue. The question was not only the potential survival of the regime but also the identity of Bhutan itself. This is the reason why anti-Drukpa activities in southern Bhutan compelled the Royal Government from the beginning to bring them into the mainstream and integrate them into Bhutanese culture. This was probably the price to pay at that time to national unity. This issue had a considerable impact on the Bhutanese society. It contributed to some extent in increasing the political consciousness of the people, not only within the Lhotshampa community, but also among the rest of the population that was concerned with growing turmoil in the southern district as shown by the intensive debates that took place at that time in the National Assembly and in local committees.

This has been part of the overall process of social awareness in Bhutan that leads to a consideration of the people themselves as a

political entity and to trace the evolutions they have gone through during the past thirty years. The exposition to education and to a lesser extent (because more recent) to the media has been crucial. Under the Fourth King's reign, the Bhutanese society has undergone dramatic structural changes evinced by impressive achievements in education which have permitted major evolutions, particularly among young Bhutanese who are absorbed into both the national system and the international mainstream. Education coverage in the kingdom has been expanding rapidly at all levels and is provided free of cost. Progress has been remarkable with the gross enrolment rate exceeding 70%. The national literacy rate is now over 60%. While the Government's efforts in the past have largely been directed at attaining universal primary education and ensuring basic education for all, more recent efforts have focused on expanding the quality and capacity of secondary and tertiary levels and on strengthening technical education and vocational training. Education is a clear prerequisite to creating political awareness. It is also essential for the development of meritocracy that has been the core of the government system created by the Fourth King.<sup>2</sup>

Among other legacies, the Fourth King has also allowed a progressive development of the media. *Kuensel* the National bi-weekly newspaper which started as a government news bulletin in 1965 was formally delinked from the government and granted autonomy in 1992.<sup>3</sup> TV and Internet were introduced in Bhutan in 1999 at the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of the King's enthronement. Less than ten years later the Internet and mobile phones have a great impact on the way of life in the capital city.<sup>4</sup> Eventually the development of tourism, which has become the second revenue contributor sector of Bhutan after hydropower, also has had an impact on the overall society. A record number (13626) of tourists visited Bhutan in the 2005-2006 fiscal year compared to only 274 in 1974 (Bhutan Times, 2006). The Fourth King has also made a strong commitment to private sector development starting from the sixth five year plan (1987-1992). The sector remains weak and is nowhere near its expected position of providing employment to the increasing number of educated Bhutanese youth, but it has contributed to more social awareness. More generally speaking private initiative has been encouraged in all sectors of the society and traditional social constraints have been alleviated to some extent as shown in 1996

when the King commanded the abolition of the *goongda woola* (free labour for development works) system.

All these evolutions have had an impact on the way the society pictures itself. Because solidarity has always been strong in local communities, social categorisation as applied in the West, was not relevant to describe the traditional rural Bhutanese society prior to the 1970s. This situation has been changing with modernisation. The fault lines found in all developing countries – between rural and urban societies, haves and have not, the younger and older generations, men and women- have been progressively developing in Bhutan too. Population growth, urbanization and tertiarization of the economy have brought many changes. Individual behaviours have already been affected. New trends have emerged with either good or negative impact on the overall society. After completing their education abroad, young Bhutanese have seeded a lifestyle steeped in consumerism and Western values. While the ancient elite had been socialised under traditional cultural principles, a growing number of young Bhutanese are being influenced by foreign trends coming from India or from the West. This is a challenge to the national ideology that needs to be addressed on the political level but is also a factor of progress. The influence of religion has been

eroded, especially among younger generations. Intra-family solidarity has been declining between urban and rural communities. In some cases traditional values have adapted quite well to foreign trends, in some other cases they have suffered from modernisation. In a town like Thimphu where there is a congregation of all kinds of people, it is more and more difficult to ensure that *Driglam Namzha* is observed properly. As far as collective behaviour is concerned, the most significant evolution has been the emergence of a middle-class, whose growth has started to impact the traditional society and polity. New social needs have emerged. Although most of them have not yet been translated into political requirements, the time has come where further political reforms are needed.

Political consciousness remains low in Bhutan compared to neighbouring countries as shown in December 2005 when the King first announced his intention to abdicate. Most of the people –including the bureaucratic elite- were in disarray. The Election Commission established on 31st December 2005 has engaged in intensive efforts to teach the population how to vote.<sup>5</sup> Yet progress has been made under the guidance of the Fourth King. As observed in other developing countries, the development of concepts like consumer rights, which have been progressively

gaining grounds in Bhutan, are bound to lead to further changes through lobbying and political mobilisation. Till the introduction of the constitution, the government has not formally banned political parties but it was well understood by the Bhutanese elite that the formation of such organisations had been discouraged. After the King's decision, the day has come when political parties are not only permitted but are also expected to become essential ingredients in a more and more liberalised and participatory political context.

### **Political Institutions of Bhutan: The March Towards Democracy**

The Fourth King has been vested with absolute powers during most of his reign. He has not been under any pressure, neither internal nor external, to embark on the path of political modernisation. When he inherited the throne, Bhutan was living in peace and tranquillity and could have remained for several decades, with the support of India, the sleeping beauty of the Himalayas. Political changes under absolute rule are usually the result of long and painful social and political strife conducted in the context of economic underdevelopment or oppression. Nepal has given the most recent example of such a phenomenon. This was not the case in Bhutan. Indeed some reforms have been

called for, especially in the context of political strife in the Himalayas including in southern districts of Bhutan. That Jigme Singye Wangchuck succeeded a monarch who was himself a genuine reformer must also be taken in account. Yet the Fourth King has been keen to follow his own path to reach an objective that has been the vital lead of his reign: leading Bhutan towards modernization, decentralisation and eventually participation and democratisation, and converting a hereditary absolute system of government into a constitutional monarchy. All the reforms he has decided during his reign have been put in perspective by his abdication and by the introduction of a draft constitution. His last decisions as a ruling monarch have demonstrated a clear sense of continuity and anticipation from his part, as if everything had been prepared from the beginning of his reign, which seems to be the case to some extent. Moreover and contrary to the practice of most monarchical systems in the world, modesty has been the hallmark of this King whose style of living and ruling has been as close to the people as it can be in such a regime. His institutional reforms have been organised under three major headings: decentralization, devolution of his own powers, and good governance, paving the way for the constitution.

### **Decentralization**

Organised decentralization has been rather new in Bhutan. The objective of the first two kings was to enhance centralization to strengthen the monarchy. Reorganisation of local powers both at the district and village levels was part of the Third King's modernization programme. Yet it is the Fourth King who really initiated the process of administration decentralization to involve the people at the grass roots level more intensively in the planning and implementation of the development activities. Between 1976 and 1981 District Development Committees (Dzongkhag Yargye Tshogchung or DYT) were established as a first step. Today there are 20 DYT's with more than 560 elected members. In 1991 Gewog Development Committees (Gewog Yargye Tshogchung or GYT's) have been set up at the block/gewog-level. Today the DYT's and GYT's play a central role in formulating the Five-year Development Plans. The Fourth King has been keen in strengthening all traditional local forums by developing people's participation in the socio-economic decision process. Although highly dominated by local elites, DYT and GYT proved to be useful platforms for informal consultation. The creation of these committees has been a significant institutional innovation (Ura, 1994). These elected

bodies that have scattered all around the country have been used by their members as forums to articulate local needs and grievances. They have been fully participating in the legislative process (Mathou, 2000). Further effective measures were undertaken to deepen the decentralization process with special emphasis on devolving local development planning, implementation and monitoring. To improve the quality and experience of the GYT leadership, a nation-wide re-election of gups (leaders of respective GYTs) was held, on the basis of universal suffrage, from September to December 2002. Another significant change was the replacement of the leadership of DYT, from a civil servant to an elected representative, allowing a better response to the development needs of respective districts. It is no surprise that the Constitution mentions the establishment of local governments in all twenty dzongkhags with view to “provide democratic and accountable Government for local communities” (Constitution Drafting Committee, 2007).

### **Devolution of powers**

The Fourth King also proved to be in favour of a progressive devolution of his powers. In 1991, he relinquished the chairmanship of the Planning Commission, which is an essential

body in the Bhutanese administrative system. In 1998, he devolved full executive powers to an elected cabinet, the authority of which was defined by the National Assembly during its 1999 session, and he re-introduced the principle of his own responsibility. As he once stated “the time has come to promote greater people’s participation in the decision making process. Our country must be ensured to always have a system of government which enjoys the mandate of the people, provides clean and efficient governance, and also has an inbuilt mechanism of checks and balances to safeguard our national interest and security” (Kuensel, 1998).

From that very moment, Bhutan ministers (*lyonpos*) were no more appointed by the King. They had to be voted in by the National Assembly. The idea of a cabinet with elected ministers came as a surprise to most Bhutanese who were not familiar with such a concept. Giving the National Assembly (*Tshogdu*) the power to elect ministers, even on a pre-selected short list basis, has contributed to introduce a larger sense of political responsibility among its members. The *Tshogdu*, which has progressively emerged as a key player in the Bhutanese political system, had been largely conservative. Being directly involved in the designation process of the Cabinet members did not change

its global attitude towards fundamental political issues. However, it forced it to adopt a new perspective. The consequence of this reform was also important for ministers and for the bureaucracy. Although many members of the administration and the assembly pleaded for the King to keep the chairmanship of the Cabinet, the King insisted on renouncing his function of head of Government. Henceforth, it was decided that the chairmanship would be assumed by elected ministers on a one-year term rotational basis. The conditions of a genuine premiership system was created but with a very short term. Cabinet members, even had to unwillingly learn to emancipate from the King's guidance. Indeed the monarch has continued to inspire national politics. Yet the formation of an elected cabinet was not a strategy to deflect the criticism of democratic militants and dissidents in exile. It was a new step towards further democratisation as shown by the latest reforms. It was then as necessary to persuade bureaucratic elites that they could emancipate from the King as it is important today to educate the people to participate in open elections.

### **Good Governance**

Good governance has been high on the agenda of the Fourth King who commended the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) on

many occasions to rationalise and strengthen the bureaucracy. Promoting efficiency, transparency, accountability and professionalism is part of his legacy. New administrative bodies like the Employment agency have been created. The introduction of a clearer hierarchy, the establishment of a career line for civil servants and the pervasion of corruption have also been promoted. The Position Classification System introduced in December 2005 is a good example of what has been done to enhance good governance in the Civil service which has acquired a high standard of performance and is one of the most effective in the sub-region. Enhancing private sector development has also been part of good governance efforts. The Fourth King has also contributed to enhancement of the judiciary system. The creation of an independent Office of Legal Affairs was proposed in 1999 to facilitate the evolution of the justice system to meet challenges ahead. This evolution is one of the most interesting in Bhutan as it combines traditional factors and modernization forces. As noted by the Chief Justice, Bhutan has to “draw inspiration from the wisdom of the past. At the same time it must face the challenges of changing times” (Gupta, 1999, p.75). For example, the concept of *jabmi* which is a traditional system of legal representation has been enhanced to guarantee the rights of defence. Generally

speaking the development of Bhutanese institutions has been accompanied and supported by further development of the national law and judicial system.

All these reforms have contributed to open the scope of political debate. Processes of negotiation which are consistent with the Bhutanese tradition of consensus have been invented to allow some form of contestation to be channelled through dialogue procedures. Local development committees have been contributing to this effort, as did the National Assembly. Although the main function of the GYTs and DYT's has remained the development process, these committees have had a momentum of their own which has enhanced the political awareness and participation of the people. Discussions in these bodies have been often vigorous as shown by the sessions of the *Tshogdu* when some of the choices made by the Fourth King were even criticised. The contest in national elections – both in the Royal Advisory Council and in the National Assembly- have also been more and more vigorous and controversial. The ancient *Tshogdu* was far from a western parliament and could easily be compared to a rubber stamp institution at the beginning of the 1970s. However, its powers have been regularly increased under the Fourth King. This body has gained authority in the legislative

sphere that progressively superseded its function as a consultative body. The decision in 1998 to reintroduce the vote of confidence in the King, although symbolical, enhanced his authority as a representative of the people. On various occasions members of the National Assembly (*chimis*) have expressed views that differed significantly from those defended by the King and the RGOB. Debates have been more and more open to criticism and propositions. Discussions on the annual budget have also become more and more incisive. The introduction of party politics came as the next logical step in this process.

### **The Constitution**

Until recently, Bhutan was still ruled under a royal decree of 1953 giving the monarchy absolute powers. Only the adaptation of a written constitution could fully replace this decree, encompass the reforms introduced since 1974 and promote a new form of government, namely a constitutional monarchy based on a two-party parliamentary system. The draft constitution was the last and most significant legacy of the Fourth King to political reform in Bhutan. He commanded the drafting in September 2001. A Constitution Drafting Committee, comprising of 39 members whose Chairman was the Chief Justice, was then

formed. The initial project has evolved through intense deliberations on the principles of state policies, rights and duties of citizens, religious pluralism and the state monastic community, separation of powers of the main organs of the state, the concept of democratic government based on a party system, political neutrality of the civil service, autonomy of the constitutional offices, local governance and decentralisation, the structure of government, and power and authority of the state apparatus. The first draft was released in March 2003. It was extensively distributed and discussed throughout the country often in presence of the King himself who visited all 20 districts to hold consultations with the public before its presentation to the National Assembly and before the King handed his power to the Crown Prince in December 2006.

The 35-article constitution has been written to be the base of a completely new system. Although the institution of monarchy remains central, many changes have been introduced. Some are quite unusual. For instance the monarch –who can be a woman, which is new in Bhutan - shall step down and hand over the throne to his successor upon reaching the age of 65 years. The concept of an automatic monarchical retirement is a unique constitutional concept. Provision is also included for the monarch

to abdicate for wilful violations of the Constitution. Fundamental rights are proclaimed. Indeed the pursuit of Gross National Happiness is considered under principles of state policy. The goal is to produce a stable and long-lasting democracy. The constitution significantly increases individual rights, including the freedom of expression, assembly and association. The new parliament is bi-cameral with elected National Council and National Assembly. Most significantly, political parties are legalised for the first time in Bhutanese history. They may run for the lower house (National Assembly) but not for the upper house (National Council). Representation in the National Assembly is introduced on the base of a two-party democratic system. The principle of national referendum is introduced. Five Constitutional Bodies are proclaimed: the Royal Audit Authority, the Royal Civil Service Commission, the Pay Commission, the Election Commission and the Anti-corruption Commission.

Although the content of the constitution has to be evaluated when all the bodies and procedures are fully in place, and after a period of adjustment, it is clear that a new age has started in Bhutanese politics.

### **Bhutan and the World: The Age of Diplomatic Maturity**

A new age has also started on the diplomatic front under the guidance of the Fourth King. Bhutan's vulnerable geopolitical location between larger, richer, stronger and occasionally antagonistic neighbours has made external relations crucial for its survival as an independent state. For that reason, and from a historical perspective, its diplomacy has been mainly focused on neutralizing its external environment to allow internal stability. Basic principals of this policy had been coined in the 1960s under the leadership of the Third King. A close relationship with India on the regional scene and a pragmatic approach of all other bilateral relations have been guiding Bhutan's foreign policy for more than four decades.

While following the same path as his father, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck had to lead the country in the context of a rapidly changing environment that implied some adjustments and allowed the creation of a new face of Bhutanese diplomacy. One of his main challenges has been to keep Bhutan out of shifting regional and world politics. Among the three Himalayan kingdoms that pre-existed his accession to the throne, Bhutan succeeded best in conciliating four mutually exclusive objectives:

sovereignty, preservation of its cultural heritage, a “special relationship” with India, and broadening of its foreign relations. As the Fourth King once stated, Bhutan is first “politically committed to a strong and loyal sense of nationhood to ensuring the peace and security of its citizens and the sovereign territorial integrity of its land.” Second, it aims “to achieve economic self-reliance.” Third, it wishes “to preserve the ancient religions and cultural heritage that have for so many centuries strengthened and enriched Bhutan’s life” (Mathou, 1994).

Although it remained discreet on the diplomatic scene, Bhutan has become a fully responsible member of the international community during his reign. This was possible through the gradual institutionalisation of the political system that has started in the late 1960s, and was considerably enhanced during the 1970s. The formation of a Foreign Affairs Department in 1970 was followed in 1972 by the creation of a fully-fledged Ministry of Foreign Affairs that was headed for 26 years (1972-1998) by the same minister.<sup>6</sup> Stability and continuity were the keys not only to create a professional Civil Service that has generated several high quality diplomats including ambassadors and the current Secretary General of SAARC, but also to allow Bhutan to implement a foreign policy, which has gained in maturity.

Establishing with India a more balanced relationship than in the past was essential as far as national sovereignty is concerned. Though the 1949 Treaty with India has often been misinterpreted to mean that India controlled Bhutan's foreign relations, the Kingdom has been keen to handle all of its foreign affairs itself including the sensitive (to India) border demarcation issue with China. Both countries have had a common interest in developing a real partnership. The détente that prevailed from the mid-1970s between India and China brought relief and confidence in New Delhi which started to consider Bhutan more valuable as a partner than as a protectorate. The Fourth King paid regular visits to India and promoted a win-win relationship with his neighbour. While praising Indian's constant and regular efforts for the economic development of Bhutan, he proved to be a trusted ally of New Delhi, both on the regional scene and at the United Nations. He could count in return on India's positive attitude on the difficult issue of Nepali dissidents.

At a certain point, the interaction between this issue and Assamese separatist activity in southern Bhutan became critical both in terms of national security and sovereignty for Bhutan, but also regarding bilateral relations with India. Ordering in late 2003 Bhutan's first military campaign in well over a century, to oust

those separatists who were using Bhutanese territory to launch raids against targets in India, was certainly one of the most historical decisions taken by the Fourth King. This was a last resort decision. His insistence to invite militants for talks to resolve the crisis through dialogue, although it was not New Delhi's approach, was a revealing sign of diplomatic maturity.

So has been the evolution of Sino-Bhutan relations, since the launching in 1984 of boundary talks between Thimphu and Beijing (Mathou, 2004). Although Bhutan would not explore the possibility of using the PRC to balance the influence of India, the reign of the Fourth King had demonstrated that Bhutan had obvious interests in normalising its relations with China without undermining its partnership with New Delhi. Twenty-one rounds of talks have proved so far that Bhutan and China are capable of dealing with a mature relation. The two countries have been using the annual consultations to exchange views on ways to expand bilateral relations. Although still limited these relations have been evolving towards a progressive normalization. Bhutan's handling of the Tibetan question has not hampered this process. On the contrary, Bhutan's policy towards Tibetan refugees turned to be a domestic issue in the Kingdom back in the mid-1970s. Although, this policy had not been designed to fit Chinese interest, Bhutan's

attitude during the last thirty years has given to the kingdom, the only Mahayana Buddhist state in the world, a unique position in the region. While Bhutan had strong cultural, religious and historical links with ancient Tibet and sympathy for modern Tibet, it has never advocated a pro-active policy on the international scene in favour of the Tibetan question. When the Kingdom is ready, this approach will participate in the emergence of Bhutan's "Chinese real-politic" whose basic principles have been settled for the future by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck.

Diplomatic maturity has also been visible through the progressive diversification of Bhutan's relations both on the regional and international scenes. Becoming a member of the United Nations had four consequences for Bhutan. First it gave the Kingdom a new window on the world. Although the King chose not to attend personally the annual General Assembly, Bhutan has used the UN as an alternative channel of communication with the outside world and as a platform to assert its international status and to consolidate financial assistance for its economic development. Second, it boosted its diplomacy. Bhutan currently has diplomatic relations with 22 countries, including the European Union. All these relations – except the one with India – have been formally established under the leadership of the Fourth King. They are all

important as Bhutan only decides to enlarge its diplomatic spectrum on the basis of very pragmatic objectives. Yet regional diplomacy has been the most significant not only because the King committed himself, but also because regional issues are crucial for Bhutan.

As a founding member of SAARC in 1985, Bhutan has supported the concept of regional cooperation in South Asia. Its membership not only helped the kingdom to contribute to more balanced relations in the region but also, being a landlocked country, to reap benefits from economic co-operation with other SAARC countries like Bangladesh. The Fourth King has been constantly insisting on “self-reliance and independence through inter-dependence” (SAARC, 1985). His speeches during SAARC summits were unique occasions to have direct insights of his diplomatic endeavours or initiatives. Under his guidance, Bhutan not only participated in several SAARC meetings but has also been occasionally actively involved in promoting regional co-operation in the region. This was the case when Bhutan offered itself as a mediator between the Government of Sri Lanka and Tamil insurgents in 1985. Bhutan has not emerged as an “Eastern Geneva” because such an objective does not fit with its diplomatic ambition. But it proved to be very consistent in its

approach toward regional politics. The Fourth King who was initially worried about the exclusion of political issues from the framework of the SAARC agreement has regularly insisted on the “historic significance for South Asia to manifest its united commitment to regional peace, co-operation and advancement” (Kharat, 1999, p.56). Although Bhutan joined the United Nations in 1971, and Non Aligned Movement in 1973 and other organisations like the Colombo Plan, the SAARC membership proved to be a major milestone in its foreign policy. SAARC has to date shown limited success due to its nature and scope and to the relations existing between the members countries, but it proved to be very beneficial to Bhutan, who has used it as a very practical window to the world. The kingdom has also gained several advantages in participating in its developmental activities in agriculture, rural development, forestry, tourism, communications, resource planning, trade and industry. Although Bhutan has been keen not to treat the Lhotshampa question as a regional issue but as a bilateral issue with Nepal, this question had dominated Bhutanese diplomacy on the regional level. The matter has been taken very seriously by the Fourth King. Several bilateral talks have been held between Nepal and Bhutan to address the issue of refugee camps. Unfortunately

political upheavals in Kathmandu and recurrent misunderstandings between the two governments prevented them to seek a viable solution to the problem. Yet this issue, that could have been detrimental to Bhutan's image abroad, was managed in a very pragmatic and balanced manner. "A well planned and positive campaign of a possible threat to Bhutan's small size, and one which is rare in its ethnic identity, had created favourable world opinion towards Bhutan" (Kharat, 2005, p.176).

So far Bhutan's exposure to the world has been very positive for the kingdom both in terms of strategic, political and economic considerations without undermining its relationship with India. This has been clearly demonstrated when the 1949 Treaty was superseded by the 2007 Treaty with India which made *de jure* what was *de facto*, that Bhutan was the master of her own foreign relations according to what King Jigme Singye Wangchuck had always promoted.

### **Challenges Ahead**

Bhutan stands on the threshold of new challenges more daunting than those it had confronted in the past. The maintenance of its identity, sovereignty and security as a nation-state will remain crucial. "The existence of Bhutan is not a historical accident. It is

the result of conscious actions taken over several centuries” (Planning Commission, 1999). No doubt that these actions have been decisive under the reign of the Fourth King. Bhutan is the sole surviving custodian of a social and cultural system that once extended beyond the Eastern Himalayas to embrace a large part of Eastern and Southern Asia. The stability that has been maintained during the last thirty years stands in sharp contrast to the situation prevailing in some other parts of the sub-region. At the same time Bhutan has experienced considerable changes. Contrary to most developing countries where colonialism and its legacy resulted in the destruction of traditional institutions and their replacement by alien structures of government that were often unable to take root in a new environment, Bhutan has not been struggling to make sense of imported institutions because it has been able to reform its own institutions.

The Fourth King has given a great legacy to his successor and to the RGOB. The monarchy will continue to keep a central role. Although the Fifth King will not be at the forefront as was his predecessor, he is vested with significant powers under the constitution and will remain the last resort should the country face a crisis. However, in a context where the monarch will not be and must not be the sole agent of modernization, the polity

will have to find a new balance. The role of the state will have to be redefined from that of a “provider” to that of an “enabler” of democracy. Responsibilities should be increasingly shared with the parliament and local committees and new partnerships will have to be formed with political parties. Responsibility of the cabinet, bureaucracy and members of parliaments will have to increase.

It is too early to assess how effective the measures taken under the provision of the constitution will be, since they are so recent. The state has traditionally ruled with a close degree of control over citizens’ activities, and it is not clear how far the new freedoms may be exercised. The parliamentary-like evolution is due to have significant impact on Bhutanese politics where personal destinies have been exclusively promoted by the Palace. The impact of factional alignments and political parties on the emergence of a stable support base within the National Assembly for long term programmes and policies has to be seen. Under the its “haphazard electoral system, there was limited continuity of membership and only a small proportion of the people’s representatives in the Assembly had a lengthy experience in government” (Rose, 1977). Under the new system representatives of the people will have to prove in the long term their ability to

challenge the bureaucracy's elite position so that the National Assembly become a real channel for advancement of the people that will dominate the decision-making process. Further progress will also have to be made to involve local communities in the decision making-process to widen the gap between rural and urban populations, and between educated and uneducated people, which are still the major lines dividing the society and polity. As earlier demonstrated, the political consciousness of members of the National Assembly and of local committees has been progressively increasing. Yet they have been essentially interested in local issues. This is why conservatism is still dominant among their circles.

In that context, the major challenge for the regime will be to allow a confrontation to happen in other occasions than the sessions of the National Assembly or the meetings of the local committees in a form that does not contradict consensus politics. It will be critical for new institutions to safeguard the basics of consensus and to promote at the same time further democratisation along distinctively Bhutanese lines.

The rising of the civil society that encompasses the space outside the sphere of government will have to contribute to that process.

It usually includes a wide range of groups such as welfare associations, religious associations, youth and women groups, alumni associations, environmental groups, community organizations, industry groups, and academic and professional associations. Organised civil society is a very new phenomenon in Bhutan. The Civil Society Act was only passed in July 2007, and only a handful of organisations have registered as yet. There is not yet any group dedicated to governance issues or election observation. As the prevailing culture of consensus does not foment voices of critical opposition, it remains to be seen how effective and independent an individual domestic observer might be. Civil society is expected to play a greater role in contributing to the objectives of Good Governance. Providing platforms and forums at national levels and within dzongkhags for civil society organizations to participate as partners to complement local committees and parliament actions will be needed (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2005). Although the private sector is still in its infancy, entrepreneurs are forming a new category in the society whose role will be decisive in the coming years. The question of power sharing between government, private sector and NGOs will become more and more accurate.

As a new factor of Bhutanese politics, the role of political parties will be critical in the coming years. The Fourth King has been cautious to avoid the main risk that would have resulted from letting divisive forces of communalism interfere with the democratization process. This is the reason why the legalisation of ethnic-based political movements alone has not been allowed as it would probably have been fatal to the culture of consensus. The constitution provides that party membership cannot be based on region, sex, language, religion or social origin. Indeed this is a restrictive provision. The local polity will have to find other fault lines adapted to its nature, at least for the moment. The opposition between progressives and conservatives, which already exists, though it has not generated definitive political tensions, could draw these lines. On the long term however what seems impossible under the current polity could become necessary should the people acquire the level of political maturity that allows the system to evolve without losing its identity. It will be interesting to see how the two political parties, namely the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (Party of Blissful Harmony, DPT) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP), which have been allowed to participate in the democratisation process and that both refer to GNH as the source of their inspiration in rather similar terms, will

be able to differentiate one from the other to organise a real democratic debate. This issue will be very acute in the context where the opposition party is very weak. Most observers have been surprised by the results of recent parliamentary elections where the DPT routed the PDP and won 45 of the 47 seats of the first new National Assembly. Yet this landslide victory shows how consensus politics is deeply rooted in the minds of the Bhutanese people at large. It will take time for the very concept of opposition to mature within the current polity. The absence of real opposition will be a challenge for the incoming government that will have to prevent consensus from being seen as a denial of democracy. The two parties are in the early stages of their development, and as yet few policy differences between them have emerged. Both have committed to follow the Tenth Five Year Plan already agreed upon by the previous government.<sup>7</sup> So far personalities have been more significant than ideological differences in the emerging political debate as shown by the results of parliamentary elections. Some fear that the introduction of democracy might create conflicts and divisions in a society where consensus plays an important role. So far the results of the elections contradict such a predicament. On the medium term it is desirable for the sake of democracy that debates evolve along

lines other than personality questions. Both parties have been active in preparing the National Assembly campaign, seeking to recruit members and familiarising the population with their candidates. There have been mutual accusations of misconduct that have been widely reported in the press and some complaints have been made to the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) before and after the vote. The elections have already introduced a new era of fractional debate which has mostly entailed duelling allegations of vote buying. This is the first sign of new behaviours that will contribute to a progressive politicisation of the society. Further developments have yet to be seen. Though the opposition is weak, the National Council will help ensure that the DPT is accountable to the public. At the same time the PDP will probably have to work hard for the next term and several topics could create fault lines within or outside the current polity.

For instance the implementation of GNH will be challenged. There are obvious contradictions between market economy and Gross National Happiness. First,

the current role of the state contradicts a flourishing private sector. Rather than a paternalistic state, which directly interferes in all parts of development, private sector developments calls for

retreat of the state to the position of a monitoring agent backed by a transparent legal framework. Second, to promote private business effectively, the government is compelled to restructure its development priorities towards an increased centrality of economic concerns. Third, private sector development requires a reorientation of people's attitude towards savings, consumption, work, time, and profit from traditional values to the rules of the market (Priesner, 1999, pp.43-44).

Priesner's categorization could be applied to some extent to non-economic sectors and to the society as a whole. In that context, notwithstanding the state's capacity to correct market or social failures, structural pressures could possibly "jeopardise the non-economic objective of Bhutanese development such as cultural and environment preservation" (ibid).

As it democratises, its polity Bhutan will be more and more exposed to influences from the outside world. Even if the temptation is great to protect the people and the culture from these influences "globalisation" is gaining ground. For a small country like Bhutan "it is a great challenge to manoeuvre between the Scylla of a hasty course towards development, risking to destroy its individuality, and the Charbydis of stagnation and

retrenchment, risking the shrinkage of Bhutan's culture into a folkloristic phenomenon" (Schaik, 1999). Although strategic parameters of Bhutan's foreign policy are not expected to change dramatically in the medium-terms as long as the China-India relation remains on the current trend, regional politics will probably have more impact on Bhutan. In that context, current political and constitutional evolution in neighbouring Nepal will have to be monitored very carefully in Bhutan. Although the difficult issue of people in refugee camps in Eastern Nepal is about to find the path of a solution, as some of these people may to be resettled in the United States under a third-country resettlement programme, it does not mean however that political activism which has been growing on the ground of ethnic dissent in Bhutan's southern districts will fade away. On the contrary, the RGOB will have to count on the development of a political opposition well organised in Nepal and whose migration to the United States and to other countries will give it the chance to structure its ideology and to challenge the regime. The resounding defeat of the PDP has created a vacuum that exiled parties will probably consider filling out. Their capacity to find support within Bhutan will largely depend on the ability of the

new Bhutanese polity to demonstrate its dedication to promote further reforms.

So far this ability has been remarkable. The Fourth King has demonstrated that reform in a traditional society does not necessarily imply the destruction of this society. Far from conservatism, change in continuity has been a reality in Bhutan and a credible alternative to revolution. This is the core of King Jigme Singye Wangchuck's political vision and constitutional legacy and the vital lead of his action as a ruling monarch. As Bhutan enters uncharted political waters, his vision will remain an inspiration for further political changes.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> According to the distinctly Bhutanese customs of the times, the great, great-grand father of the Fourth King was elected the first hereditary King by consensus of a *genja* (an oath of allegiance) which was then stamped with the seals of all sections of Bhutanese society in 1907.

<sup>2</sup> *The Election Bill of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2008* states that a person is qualified to be elected as a Member of the National Assembly and of the National Council if he “possesses a formal university degree”, can be interpreted to some extent as a continuation of this principle. To be elected as a Member of a local government, a candidate must be functionally literate and possesses skills adequate to discharge his duties. So far these restrictive provisions that exclude a majority of the population have not been widely criticised.

<sup>3</sup> The media has recently become liberalised, with the passing of the *Media Act in 2006*. Two private weekly newspapers (the *Bhutan Times* and the *Bhutan Observer*) have begun operating, and two commercial radio stations, together with some cable TV channels, are now broadcasting.

<sup>4</sup> Internet facilities are reliable in Thimphu but very primitive elsewhere except for Phuentsholing.

<sup>5</sup> Two mock elections were conducted in April and May 2007.

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<sup>6</sup> When he retired in 1998, Lyonpo Dawa Tsering was the longest serving Minister of Foreign affairs in the world.

<sup>7</sup> A third party, the Bhutan People United Party was rejected by the ECB in part because it did not meet the cross-national requirement. Political parties formed by refugees are not permitted to operate inside Bhutan and are considered to be anti-national by the Bhutanese government.