THE ROYAL SEMI-AUTHORITARIAN DEMOCRACY OF BHUTAN

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LEXINGTON BOOKS
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London
This book is dedicated to the people of Bhutan. The history of democracy is an archive of struggle. Democracy has not simply emerged by virtue or chance. In almost every nation, the people wrestle for freedom and democracy. Thus, “inclusive democracy” does not fall from heaven, gifted by the king from the throne nor does it fall from the tree like ripe mangoes and apples. The Bhutanese have to work hard to reach up and pick it and at the same time, reach up and pull down the web of feudal authoritarianism system to get rid of the manacles of totalitarianism.
What is born will die, what has been gathered will be dispersed, what has been accumulated will be exhausted, what has been built up will collapse, and what has been high will be brought low.

—Teaching of the Lord Buddha

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Every piece of research has an individual genesis in terms of the epistemic foundations of the proposed arguments and concerning the personal experience and interests that led the researcher to inquire into the issue under investigation. This is a purely academic piece of work brought into being from the academic inquisitiveness of this author and is not in any way aimed at the “institution of monarchy, king, or any individuals in Bhutan” today.

This book is an outcome of rigorous and difficult research and academic pursuit, involving years of thoughts and occasional roadblocks. Countless are those who have helped to see my way through, or around many otherwise difficult obstacles on the road to make this book to have a glimpse of the light of the day. I would like to extend my sincere and heartfelt thanks to all for their unwavering and unflinching intellectual support, guidance, and help while researching, writing, and reviewing this book.

In writing this book, I have frequently used the studies of eminent scholars. I am highly indebted to all of them. I would like to make a sincere apology to that entire source, which have been quoted in the book but not properly acknowledged due to human and technical errors, if any.

I owe my intellectual debt of appreciation to Lexington Books (an imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.) and the team for their earnest efforts to bring out this book. I am solely responsible for the opinions, analysis, observations, comments, conclusion, and errors of facts and interpretations of this book. The views and opinions expressed are solely of the author and don’t in any way represent any expression of opinions on the part of the organization to which author is affiliated.

—Dhurba Rizal
Preface

Bhutan politics is a mystery, inexplicable to the international minds. It requires an unambiguous perceptive of both the context and content to see the various patterns common to politics in Bhutan. If one were a real insider, one would see all occurrences in Bhutan history and politics as being determined by the kings. This book endeavors to offer an insight to the changing dimensions of politics in Bhutan and royal democratization. Bhutan today represents an ambiguous political system that coalesces the rhetorical acquiescence of democracy with illiberal authoritarian attributes and unabated tyranny of the former royalists and monarchists under a royal shadow. Royal democracy is a fairy tale but paints the frontage of democracy. The smokescreen of one kind of authoritarian regime is yet not democracy but a new form of semi-authoritarian rule.

The political reforms in Bhutan were orchestrated by the “traditional regime and elites in a traditional society” as a tightly controlled, top-down process without devolution of power outside the regime. Royal democracy could best be understood as an attempt to construct a political regime that impersonates democratic institutions but works outside the logic of political representation and seeks to repress any trace of genuine political pluralism. Exploring the authoritarian logic behind the democratic rhetoric is especially important for Bhutan, which is today glorified by the United Nations as “the Mecca of Gross National Happiness” and depicted by many as a model of top-down democracy on popular media and academia.

Holding the state-controlled elections alone do not proffer a cure for deeper political, economic, and social predicaments besetting Bhutan today, and does not present prolific plinth for a democratic transition. The glimmer of royal semi-authoritarian democracy is a “Jigmecracy,” an old Jigme’s system with new labels, a classic case of transition from traditional regime in a traditional society.

There is no fairy-tale future for Bhutan, which is often romanticized as an ancient Buddhist country with tantalizing pre-modern history barely known compared to Sikkim, Ladakh, Tibet, and Nepal. Thus, in trying to understand royal democracy in Bhutan, there is a danger of drawing hasty conclusions on
the basis of values and standards, which may not be entirely relevant to Bhutan’s reality.

The origin of this book lays in the research that I have conducted for many years. This book intends to address the more inquiring mind. This book in general aspires to underscore the emerging political system in the Bhutanese context and the ability to envision and construct the political, economic, and social process. In order to unwrap the Bhutanese puzzle, contribute to debate, clarify some issues, and help lucidly to understand democracy doubles, it is divided into an introduction and eight chapters followed by a conclusion, glossary of Bhutanese terms, and an index.

—Dhurba Rizal
**Acronyms**

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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>BDC</td>
<td>Block development committees</td>
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<td>BTI</td>
<td>Bertelsmann Stiftung Gutersloh</td>
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<td>BNDP</td>
<td>Bhutan National Democratic Party</td>
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<td>BPP</td>
<td>Bhutan People’s Party</td>
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<td>CEDAW</td>
<td>Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women</td>
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<td>BNP</td>
<td>Bhutan National Party</td>
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<td>BKP</td>
<td>Bhutan Kuen-Nyum Party</td>
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<td>BPUP</td>
<td>Bhutan People United Party</td>
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<td>DYT</td>
<td>Dzongkha Yargay Tshogdu</td>
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<td>DDC</td>
<td>District Development Committees</td>
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<td>DNC</td>
<td>Druk National Congress</td>
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<td>DPT</td>
<td>Druk Phuensum Tshogpa</td>
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<td>DNT</td>
<td>Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa</td>
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<td>DCT</td>
<td>Druk Chirwang Tshogpa</td>
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<td>ECB</td>
<td>Election Commission of Bhutan</td>
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<td>GNH</td>
<td>Gross National Happiness</td>
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<td>GYT</td>
<td>Gewog Yargay Tshogchung</td>
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<td>GNP</td>
<td>Gross National Product</td>
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<td>HRW</td>
<td>Human Rights Watch</td>
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<td>HDR</td>
<td>Human Development Report</td>
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<td>ICCPR</td>
<td>International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights</td>
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<td>KU</td>
<td>Body reincarnations of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal</td>
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<td>MI</td>
<td>Mind reincarnations of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal</td>
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<td>NGOs</td>
<td>Nongovernmental organizations</td>
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<td>NU</td>
<td>Ngultrum</td>
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<td>PDP</td>
<td>People’s Democratic Party</td>
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<td>PFHR</td>
<td>People’s Forum for Human Rights in Bhutan</td>
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<td>RGOB</td>
<td>Royal Government of Bhutan</td>
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<td>SI</td>
<td>Speech reincarnations of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal</td>
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<td>UFD</td>
<td>United Front for Democracy</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>The United Nations</td>
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<td>UNDP</td>
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Bhutan has long been viewed in the West as possessing an inherently authoritarian political system and culture. Hegel contends that the history of the world travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of history, Asia is the beginning. The East knew and to the present day knows that no one is free; the Greek and Roman world, that some are free; the German world knows that all are free. The first political form, therefore, which we observe in history, is despotism, the second democracy and aristocracy, the third monarchy.\(^1\) Hegel’s view resonates with many of the analysts of Bhutan politics today, who pointed to the lack of an indigenous history of democracy and a long history of authoritarian, hierarchical political thought. The introduction chapter attempts to delve into the conceptual issues to enlighten the readers with the conceptual framework of democracy along with the methodology and the structure of the book. The first part of the chapter commences with the brief clarification on the conceptualization of the phenomena on which the study is focused, building conceptual framework of semi-authoritarianism democracy doubles. It succinctly surveys the variety of theoretical arguments that have been advanced by scholars and experts on semi-authoritarianism democracy doubles. The second section of the chapter has presented methodology and structure with consideration on the purpose of the study, research methodology, limitations of the study, and the disposition of the book.

**HIGHER ORDER CONSIDERATIONS AND SHAPING PERCEPTIONS: UNTANGLING CONCEPTUAL ISSUES OF DEMOCRACY**

The democracy was first conceived and nurtured, albeit in prototype form, in the local context in the same way as with all political concepts and principles. Certain elements of democracy were developed in most societies in various forms and at various stages of their political development. Elements of the
democratic spirit are perceptible in the early thought of all major cultural traditions—African, Arab, Persian, Asian, and European. The most distant linear link to the traditional origins of democracy may be found, inter alia, in the Icelandic alting of the tenth century CE, the Irish tuaths, and the Indian panchayats. The modern state concept of democracy is rooted in the revolutionary experience of seventeenth-century Europe and eighteenth-century America. Irrespective of its historical antecedents, the concept of democracy exists as an abstract model of universal application.

As numerous countries have moved away from authoritarianism, the concept of democracy has been applied in many new settings. Although the new national political regimes in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the former communist world share important attributes of democracy, many of them differ profoundly from the democracies in advanced industrial countries. Some, it is widely agreed, cannot be considered fully democratic. Others are often viewed as meeting minimal criteria for democracy, yet still exhibit features the scholars find problematic. An important consequence of the pursuit of these goals has been the proliferation of alternative forms of the concept, including a surprising number of subtypes, such as “authoritarian democracy,” “neo-patrimonial democracy,” “military dominated democracy,” and “proto-democracy.” An examination of the literature reveals over 550 such examples of democracy “with adjectives” (i.e., many times more subtypes than countries being analyzed). Yet, as the process of democratization has continued, and as attention has shifted from the initial transitions from authoritarian rule to issues of democratic consolidation, the proliferation of subtypes and other conceptual innovations has persisted.²

The wave of “democratic sanguinity” in the 1990s associated with the global triumph of democracy and capitalism around the world, what Francis Fukuyama³ enthusiastically described as “the end of history,” has now given way to sober appraisals about the current health of democratic systems in the developing world. Since the early days of the “third wave” of global democratization, it has been clear that the transition from authoritarian rule can lead anywhere. Over the past quarter century, many have had brought formal political structures in regions ranging from Africa to Asia to Latin America. However, many others have not. Instead, many of these new regimes have become stuck in transition, combining a rhetorical acceptance of liberal democracy with illiberal and authoritarian attributes. They have given birth to new forms of authoritarianism that do not fit into the classic categories of one-party, military, or personal
dictatorship. They have produced regimes that hold elections and tolerate some pluralism, but at the same time violate minimal democratic norms so severely and systematically that it makes no sense to classify them as democracies, however qualified.

Diamond and Lipset pointed out that “the boundary between democratic and non democratic is sometimes a blurred and in perfect one and beyond it stretch out a much broader range of variation in the political system.” The time has come to abandon misleading labels and to take their anti-democratic nature seriously. Most of these regimes today are neither clearly democratic nor fully authoritarian. They inhabit the misty zone between liberal democracy and closed authoritarianism. To order this universe of ambiguous regimes, some authors have been working with broad intermediate categories like “democratizing regime” or “semi-democracy.” Others have been developing lists of more specific “diminished subtypes” such as “illiberal” or “delegative” democracy.

Unlike military dictatorships, novel forms of authoritarianism are compatible with electoral politics and do not require a generalized suspension of constitutional guarantees. Instead, they operate within the confines of formal democratic arrangements and entail a selective assault on constitutional mechanisms. The term elected authoritarianism attempts to encapsulate conceptually this novel phenomenon, which relies on a hybrid form of regime that combines a democratic access to power with the authoritarian exercise of power. To borrow S. Levitsky and J. Loxton’s definition: “Competitive authoritarian regimes are hybrid regimes in which formal democratic institutions are viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents’ abuse skews the playing field to such an extent that the opposition’s ability to compete is seriously compromised.”

When the spread of democratization slowed down, the theorists of regime change have begun to put more emphasis on the concept of democratic consolidation and sorting the cases into categories reflecting degrees of democratization. Parallel to the proliferation of both the transition and consolidation paradigms, a distinct direction in scholarship on comparative politics has emerged, which began to examine those political regimes that couple formal democratic institutions with authoritarian practices. In countries across the former Soviet Union, in North Africa and the Middle East, in sub-Saharan Africa and in South and East Asia, there was an initial democratic opening, with free and fair elections in place, yet what have emerged over time were new forms of authoritarianism. Scholars have argued that hybrid regimes are a
separate type of regime distinct from democratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian regimes altogether. Properly characterizing such regime types spawned a number of distinct conceptual strategies.

The way scholars have chosen to make sense of the regimes that combine democratic and authoritarian features is to position them at the very center between the two endpoints democracy and authoritarianism and begin examining the properties of so-called hybrid regimes. The term “hybrid regimes,” introduced by Diamond, denotes regimes that are neither clearly democratic nor conventionally authoritarian that emerged out of a widespread observation of an increasing number of countries around the world taken on democratic features, at least superficially. These regimes are exhibiting some degree of political pluralism coupled with multiparty elections and are dubbed “pseudo democracies,” because, as Diamond argues, the term “resonates distinctively with the contemporary era, in which democracy is the only broadly legitimate regime form, and regimes have felt unprecedented pressure to adopt or at least to mimic the democratic form.” Hybrid regimes have witnessed a worldwide expansionary trend, surpassing far more the trend toward democracy.

In seeking to explore in depth the notion of hybrid regimes, Morlino argues that hybrid regimes, while appearing as ambiguous forms of political organization, are nonetheless “a substantial reality that can be considered an autonomous model of regime vis-à-vis democracy, authoritarianism, and the traditional regime.” This phenomenon has made apparent the fact that a great number of regimes are no longer in transition to democracy as has been argued within the field of transitology and constitute a new authoritarian kind that evidently is here to stay.

Carothers rejects the transition paradigm as a simplistic, conceptually incorrect approach that has outlived its applicability of the early days of the third wave of democratization. He usefully points to the diversity of political patterns among the so-called transitional countries, most of which have displayed few signs of democratizing and their political trajectories should be understood as alternative directions, not way stations to liberal democracy. Carothers identifies distinct “semi-authoritarian” regimes as those that follow some of the forms of democracy yet maintain sufficient limits on political openness to ensure they are in no real dangers of losing their grip on power—and are certain to constitute a major feature of the international political landscape of the next several decades. There is a complex political dualism at play in the workings of a semi-authoritarian regime, so that while adopting the basic institutional forms of
democracy, such regimes apply a successful strategy of controlling the levers of political power. Interestingly, Carothers argues that the core meaning of the term “semi-authoritarianism” implies not a failure to reach full democracy but a regime’s deliberate and vigorous strategy to sustain itself.

Ottaway, in a similar way, indicates “the deliberate character of semi-authoritarian regimes as not failed democracies or democracies in transition but rather as carefully constructed and maintained alternative systems.” She places semi-authoritarian regimes as a distinct regime type and argues that it is wrong to regard these as transitional regimes and study them solely within the discussions on democratization. Following Diamond’s, Carother’s, and Ottaway’s analyses, Levitsky and Way have usefully warned analysts that “hybrid regimes might be thought of not just as insufficiently democratic democracies but as ‘insufficiently authoritarian autocracies.’” They have developed a concept of “competitive authoritarianism” to account for those regimes that have emerged out of broken down, full-blown authoritarian regimes. The relevant cases of interest include Russia under Putin, Croatia under Tudjman, Serbia under Milosevic, Ukraine under Kuchma, Peru under Fujimori, Haiti, Albania, Armenia, Mexico, and Zambia during the 1990s.

What distinguishes “competitive authoritarianism” from other types of nondemocratic outcomes is that political authority is primarily obtained and exercised through formal democratic institutions. Such regimes fail to meet conventional minimum standards of democracy, for the ruling elites constantly and extensively violate democratic rules by abusing state resources, denying the opposition adequate media coverage, harassing opposition candidates and their supporters, and often manipulating electoral results. “A political system becomes electoral authoritarian, when violations of the minimum criteria for democracy are so severe that they create an uneven playing field between government and opposition.” Such a type of hybrid regime stands in the very middle between democracy and full-scale authoritarianism. As Schedler emphasizes, it is not a straightforward undertaking to draw a clear boundary between electoral democracies on the one hand and electoral authoritarianism on the other. For, in principle, any democratic regime must adhere to a consistent set of minimal democratic norms, and once one of the constitutive norms is bridged, a regime cannot be regarded as a democratic one. It has been seen above how Levitsky and Way, and Shedler, among others, ponder the dynamics of electoral politics in authoritarian regimes. Indeed, it is clear from their analyses that authoritarianism with elections may not lead to democratization; at the same
time, elections, manipulated as they are by the authorities, do not guarantee these autocrats are protected in their grip on power.

Traditionally, there are theories of totalitarianism and authoritarianism approaches that deal with types of non-democratic rule such as military rule, the personal rule of a monarch or a dictator, there is also the “one party state” institutional approach. These have been extensively explored in the works of Arendt, Friedrich and Brzezinski, Huntington and Moore, Linz, Purcell, Anderson, Schneider, Schmitter, among others, who have examined the identity of rulers and their modes of governance and legitimation. These works on political authoritarianism have sprung as a result of an increasing number of countries having come under authoritarian rule in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the growing awareness that authoritarian regimes were a category of their own.

Does classifying authoritarian regimes into different types help explain their survival or breakdown? Brownlee cautions that “a flurry of new typologies outpaces the development and confirmation of explanations, these new authoritarian subtypes risk becoming an intellectual cul-de-sac . . . the fresh branding of old regimes does not necessarily illuminate the going-on of the world’s autocracies or explain why so many still stand.”

Hadenius and Teorell contend that the breakdown of an authoritarian regime, in case of all the types presented, does not automatically lead to democratization and that in fact more often than not collapsed authoritarian regimes are replaced by yet another authoritarian regime (77 percent of cases in the time span under investigation, with 23 percent resulting in democracy). This applies predominantly to the governing monarchies and traditional one-party states, whereas the multiparty system is the one likely to democratize in a gradual way.

Bueno de Mesquita et al. argues that in authoritarian regimes, a principle challenge originates from within the political elite. Thus, the ruling authorities must be on a constant watch in order to prevent ambitious associates from power take over. Following Gandhi and Przeworski, Magaloni takes the issue of how precisely the autocrat manages to remain in office much further. She develops an in-depth theory of power-sharing under authoritarianism, and ways in which it influences regime longevity. The fundamental argument is that an autocrat, wanting to remain in power, is compelled to establish power-sharing arrangements with the elite, arrangements that must be outright credible. For the power-sharing deal to be credible, the autocrat must “give up his absolute
powers to select members of the ruling clique into government positions . . . to those who invest in the existing institutions rather than in subversive coalitions."

Barma, Ratner, and Spector’s research reveals that authoritarian regimes, such as China, Russia, and Venezuela, have embraced engagement in the international system in specific ways that dually enable their success and shield them from pressures for domestic political reform. A set of modern authoritarian states, defined as “open authoritarian regimes,” have established at the domestic level versions of state-controlled capitalism and retain a sturdy grip on power. Barma et al. argues that authoritarian regimes apply a strategy of the so-called sociopolitical leapfrogging in order to keep the control over society. Such an approach entails cherry-picking the most successful social, economic, and domestic political policies of democratic countries that are then applied at home in a step-by-step, closely controlled fashion.

Ezrow and Frantz point to the prevalence of a complex amalgamation of structural, geopolitical, and historical factors giving birth to and sustaining various types of authoritarian regimes. They argue these military dictatorships, largely present in Latin America, are sustained by the prevalence of internal factors such as good financial bases, large levels of economic inequality, close alignment with upper and middle classes, and the dominance of weak political parties, which ensured that military is not subservient to any one party.

The literature divulges a “gray zone,” which has been identified as a new category in the analysis of political transition. The “gray zone” is the political limbo in between an authoritarian regime and a consolidated democracy. It comprises countries that present at the same time, some features of democratic political life and authoritarian traits. That is to say that in these countries there is some, although limited, political space for the opposition parties and civil society, regular elections alongside a low level of political participation beyond voting, elections of uncertain legitimacy, poor performance by the state, and frequent abuse of the law by governmental officials. While analysts have unanimously come to the recognition of the existence of the “gray zone,” the main analytical challenge they face is the definition of the types of political regimes gravitating toward it.

One of the most topical and accurate categorization of “gray zone” political regime is put forward by Marina Ottaway—namely, the category of “semi-authoritarian states.” An analytical category which, it is worth stressing, does not merely indicate political regimes that are half or partially authoritarian but
points to the typically fluid and changeable political realities of the “gray zone.” The authoritarian forms presented by recent scholarship are conceptualized more or less as an intermediate category of regimes in between two general notions of electoral democracies on the one hand and closed authoritarian regimes on the other.

In order to make sense out of large array of concepts discussed above, hybrid regimes can be grouped into two main approaches: variants of democracy or authoritarianism. This also demonstrates that current classification has a problem of authoritarianism with adjectives in addition to democracy with adjectives. Notably, this conceptual classification has fashioned the basis of my understanding in the preceding section. Thus, conceptual disagreements have been at the heart of the hybrid regimes literature, defining the fault line between diminished subtypes of democracy and diminished subtypes of authoritarianism.

In the 1990s, scholars most commonly classified hybrid regime as a diminished subtype of democracy as a response to the complexities of democratization during the third wave. The dominant trend of classifying hybrid regime changed course after the new millennium by favoring diminished subtypes of authoritarianism. Thus, the first approach stressed the democratic nature of a hybrid nature and the second approach emphasized their authoritarian form of rule despite the guise of democratic institutions. Regardless of the approach taken thus far, the blurred boundaries of hybrid regime persist. This situation has resulted in authoritarianism with adjectives in addition to democracy with adjectives, creating a number of problems in the field. Should countries like Bhutan be considered hybrid regime or should it be viewed as full instances of authoritarianism? These questions highlight the fragmented nature of the field creating impediments for framework to study a country like Bhutan.

Stated differently, it is difficult to evaluate Bhutan based on diverse conceptualization of hybrid regimes. Moreover, regime classification has important policy implication. The problematic conceptualizations can impede proper policy decisions and jeopardize the expected outcome. Consequently, there is a need to fully standardize the relationship between regime types. This means the cases one selects and attributes those cases contain are critical for both theory and policy formulation.

I consider such an approach as nonscientific to study a case like Bhutan. It does not offer the possibility to look at the political reform process, which was orchestrated by the established power elites as a tightly controlled top-down process and was implemented gradually and in a piecemeal manner by
traditional regime to safeguard the interests of monarch, old guards, cream of the crop royalists, and elites. Moreover, the literature discussed above failed to capture the case of “transition of traditional regime” like one in Bhutan, which closely resembles the semi-authoritarianism of Ottaway. Ottaway pointed out that:

Semi-authoritarian states are political hybrids that is political regimes, which combine a façade of acceptance of liberal democracy, the existence of some formal democratic institutions and respect for a limited sphere of civil and political liberties with . . . essentially illiberal or even authoritarian traits. Basically, this ambiguity is deliberate. Semi-authoritarian regimes are not imperfect democracies struggling toward improvement and consolidation but regimes determined to maintain the appearance of democracy without exposing themselves to the political risks that free competition entails. Consequently, semi-authoritarian regimes allow little competition for power, reducing in this way the government’s accountability. Still, they leave enough political space for political parties and organizations of the civil society to form, for an independent press to function to some extent, and for some political debate to take place.26

Today, we see the rise of a great number of shallow, instable, and hybrid regimes that cannot be easily classified as either fully authoritarian or democratic but display some characteristics of both—in short, they are “semi-authoritarian regimes.” The most important characteristic of semi-authoritarian regime is the existence and persistence of mechanisms that effectively prevent the transfer of power from the hands of the incumbent leaders to a new political elite or organization.27

Miller, White, and Heywood have alleged that democracy requires democrats.28 However, these hybrid regimes lack democrats. Such regimes abound in countries like Kazakhstan, Bhutan, Azerbaijan, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa. The old traditional elites have transformed themselves into constitutional monarchs, prime ministers, and presidents and remain strongmen, whose power is barely checked by weak democratic institutions. The dynamics that keep most semi-authoritarian regimes in power are based on a mixture of two factors: deliberate manipulation of formal democratic institutions by incumbents and forced acceptance of the regime by citizens.

Bhutan is by and large an authoritarian regime. Many studies and reports including Freedom House’s annual report Nations in Transition has throughout the years become a rather strong critic of the political regime there, describing Bhutan as authoritarian regime. The Bhutan political regime has been often described as resembling other authoritarian regimes, where leaders seek to wrap themselves in some form of democratic legitimacy. Overall, there is a top-down approach of governance in achieving some façade of liberalization and reform.
Thus, the case of Bhutan is very silent, as it is within an ongoing change from a traditional regime to a hybrid regime, which is not yet the case. This reflects that there are no abundances of examples of traditional regimes in the world today, and this analysis can cover an originally empty space. So Bhutan is a classic case and the textbook example of a “case of transition from a traditional regime in traditional society.” This is convincingly reflected by the key attributes of the traditional regime discussed in chapter 4 of this book. Thus, this provides a new theoretical framework much more original than the existing one to explain the case like that of Bhutan. Drawing on the Bhutan case, this study is a modest effort to fill the empty space. It would be useful to conceptualize the Bhutanese case, refine existing theories of democratization, and perhaps add some categories to the concept of democracy to provide for the possibility of characterizing a case like Bhutan as also for an analysis of future case studies of democratizing countries.

I take the view that there is a messy middle ground between the democracy and authoritarianism regimes, which seriously repress their people, such as Bhutan. There have been a number of academic discussions on the definition and the emergence of democracy and the characterization and classification of its various subtypes. An effective democracy requires more than the elections and elite rule. It also requires key political institutions and basic political and civil rights, such as freedom of speech, association, and information. To deserve the label modern democracy, the country needs to fulfill some basic requirements, which need not only be written down in its constitution, but must be kept up in everyday life by politicians and authorities. Beetham stated that: “At the heart of the concept of democracy lie essential democratic principles, a popular control over collective decision-making and decision-makers, and equal rights to share such control or political equality.” Sisk has explained that: democracy is promising because the principles, institutions and rules associated with democratic practice seek to manage inevitable social conflicts in deeply divided and less conflicted societies alike. Democracy is defined in two ways. Thin democracy: one which basically means free and fair elections. Thick democracy: elections with other attributes as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of ethnic and religious groups to pursue their beliefs, clear rules of law, an independent judiciary, checks and balances on elected officials, a vibrant civil society, and civilian control over the military. The meaning and features of democracy for the purposes of this book has been conceptualized along the thick democracy. Democracy understood as self-government requires not only
equality of political participation but also free political competition. What needs to be added is another dimension concerned with legitimacy based on an equal distribution of sovereignty like providing equal shares of legal political freedoms for citizens.

For the purpose of this book, I have concentrated on democracy at the minimum as a form of government where a constitution guaranteeing basic personal and political rights, fair and free multiparty elections, political participation open to all citizens, guaranteed civil, political, sociocultural and economic liberties, corruption free and responsible government, independent courts of law, civil society, free media and political tolerance, and civilian control over the military.

The land of Gross National Happiness (GNH) represents a vivid example of the democracy doubles, where a historical legacy of strong autocracy is believed to be one of the dominant factors, which hampers the fragile reform process. This book argues that the democracy doubles has not proved to be efficient in developing a liberal democratic state and has not managed to introduce a viable political system that would be able to overcome the serious political, social, and economic problems besetting Bhutan.

The semi-authoritarian rule is often regarded as simple for states to execute and unworthy of scholarly analysis. Far more attention has been devoted to the challenge of instituting and consolidating democracy. The analysis at hand is made against the backdrop of a theoretical approach outlining strategies in authoritarian states, including employing democratic rhetoric to sustain authoritarian rule. Exploring the authoritarian logic behind the democratic rhetoric is especially important for Bhutan, which is today portrayed as a model of top-down democracy glossed under the rubric of GNH. Thus, the institutions and practices of authoritarian states, including illiberal democracies, continue to suffer scholarly neglect as sustaining political phenomena. Drawing on the Bhutan case, this book is a modest effort to address that balance.

A FEW NOTES ON METHODOLOGY AND STRUCTURE

Every piece of research has an individual genesis in terms of the epistemic foundations of the proposed arguments and concerning the personal experience and interests that led the researcher to inquire into the issue under investigation. The method of investigation took the help of primary data, as well as based on
pursuit of relevant documents and records related to academic publications and other information on the subject.

**Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this research is to contemplate the royal semi-authoritarianism democracy in Bhutan and provide the theoretical and practical knowledge to the concerned stakeholders on royal-initiated political reforms in traditional milieu and society. The overall intent of this study is to contribute to and illustrate a better understanding of democracy. The case of Bhutan is a very silent one as it is within an ongoing change from a traditional regime to a hybrid regime, which is not yet the case. This reflects that there is no abundance of example of traditional regimes in the world today. This analysis could cover originally an empty space as the majority of the discussions are on the authoritarianism of hybrid regime. So Bhutan is a classic example of a “*case of transition from a traditional regime in traditional society.*” Thus, the aim of this analysis is to contribute a new theoretical framework much more original than the existing one to explain the cases comparable to that of Bhutan.

**Research Methodology**

The core of this research is based on grounded theory, a social science strategy of qualitative inquiry with a wide range and various sources of data collection. Research and data are presented here to support the initial “assertion” that royal-initiated political reform should be treated as a preemptive measure by the king to thwart democratic movement and political oppositions.

This study has reviewed the royal-guided reforms and laid the theoretical and practical basis for future democratization in Bhutanese polity. The present study is based on information collected both from primary and secondary sources. Government documents, foreign policy reports, statements of senior leaders, and interviews have been used as primary sources. Secondary research inputs involve constant monitoring of day-to-day developments and events from open sources, such as books, research articles, commentaries in the print and electronic media, and reports of public and private research institutes. To a limited extent, time was allocated for a number of non-structured telephonic interviews and informal discussions with experts of different background to supplement the desk review. My views are also informed by close interactions with a cross section of Bhutanese people for more than three decades.
Limitations of the Study

The present study covers Bhutan’s semi-authoritarian democracy doubles. Since Bhutan is a very secluded country, availability and procurement of the secondary and primary data and information is difficult. To compensate this lacuna, extensive and consistent published information has been used. Also the quality of documents available for this study varied greatly. One of the most severe problems faced was the dominance of process-related information and literature written by backpackers/hitchhiker tourists, royal guests, shallow scholars, short-term visiting experts, and academics not accustomed with the context and content of Bhutan.

Since this is an attempt to study the complex royal democracy glossed under the cloak of last Shangri-la and GNH, the outcome is suggestive and requires more empirical research in each of the features and components of democracy in the future. Like any such grouping of democracy, this is also subject to many valid criticisms. It is overly simplistic. It is at times arbitrary, and it contains inevitable overlap. Even with strenuous efforts, it became very difficult to pin down the crucial concept that must underlie the democracy doubles in a country akin to Bhutan. This underscores the overlap of the many features and modules of semi-authoritarianism democracy doubles in the book. Thus, far from being in a position to develop exact quantifiable scenarios, this book only argues on the basis of causal probabilities derived from personal observation, practical experience, and theoretical knowledge. Also, this study favors further democratization in Bhutan. So it may not be fully a neutral work.

Disposition of the Book

The book intends to address the more inquiring mind. In my opinion, analysts, journalists, diplomats, academics, and others do not describe the Bhutan state accurately. They have looked at Bhutan as a combination of Buddhist spirituality and barefoot economics, which have molded into a model of GNH. It has received little attention from social science scholars and critical theorists. Schreder notes: “Bhutan—the tiny Himalayan country currently installing radical democracy—is sometimes mythologized and orientalized in popular media through utopian projection. The GNH must be baffling and enticing to the western democrats and hoary French Maoist alike.” The book attempts to offer an insight to the problems by facilitating wider and deeper perspectives of Bhutan’s contemporary challenges and royal democratization. The analysis in the subsequent chapters has unwrapped what really is this romanticized land.
Thus, in trying to understand democracy in Bhutan, there is a danger of drawing a hasty conclusion on the basis of values and standards, which may not be entirely relevant to Bhutan’s reality. The royal-initiated democracy of Bhutan as such is at risk of being viewed out of context leading to possible inaccurate conclusions, which in turn strengthens one’s misconceptions and biases. Accordingly, analysts, journalists, diplomats, academics, and others must fully understand the Bhutanese context and content to avoid the past fancies and fallacies for the critical country studies.

The raw material and inputs of the royal democracy conversed in the book can present important comparative insights into the semi-authoritarianism democracy doubles and their manifestations in developing third world. Bhutan is known and often romanticized beyond the Himalayas as the last Shangri-La, a place of nearly boundless happiness and pristine natural vistas. It is also frequently lauded for its unique approach to development and its emphasis on cultural and environmental protection, which seem like a welcome antidote to Western materialism. In recent years, its so-called deliberate, peaceful transition to a constitutional monarchy has also won it plaudits for one of the most astonishing and unique transitions to democracy witnessed by scholars so far. However, Schreder has succinctly presaged that “the reality of Bhutan’s democratic transition is much messier than myth, predictable, filled with ethnic conflict and serious challenges to coherent national identity.” It is still too early to say how Bhutan’s political transformation will evolve. The emerging semi-authoritarianism royal democracy has royalist political parties, dominated by royalist sympathizers without effective opposition. Bhutanese appears to have cautiously embraced the top-down democratization process, but Bhutan faces a range of other challenges. Schreder cautions that: “Despite the lack of critical attention to these contradictions, the country has in the past few years been represented fairly in popular culture in multiple newspaper articles, travel narratives, holiday guides and National Geographic. These representations have been largely romanticized; in a straightforward way.”

While the country of Bhutan is known to many as an ancient Buddhist kingdom with enticing pre-modern history, the knowledge of inner politics is often vague, sometimes fanciful, and occasionally highly critical. Thus, it is useful to orient readers to some of the facts about Bhutan to facilitate greater understanding of the setting of the country’s politics. The romanticized and mystified views—“the land of GNH, the last Shangri-la, the Mecca of GNH and the Hermit Kingdom”—projected by rulers and promoted by neoliberalized Western
academics, tourists, and others have preempted critical country studies on Bhutan. To overwhelm such deficits, the royal-initiated top-down reforms are explicated at length to explore if Bhutan is exceedingly an unparalleled land as portrayed beyond Himalayas or atypical governed by a benevolent young king. In order to contribute to debate, clarify some issues, and help to lucidly be familiar with Bhutanese semi-authoritarian democracy doubles, this book is divided into an introduction and eight chapters followed by a conclusion, a glossary of Bhutanese terms, bibliography, and index.

The introduction has commenced with the brief clarification on the conceptualization of the phenomena on which the study is focused, building a conceptual framework of semi-authoritarianism democracy doubles. It succinctly surveys the variety of theoretical arguments that have been advanced by scholars and experts on semi-authoritarianism democracy doubles. It has also presented methodology and structure with limelight on the purpose of the study, research methodology, limitations of the study, and the disposition of the book.

Democracy could be installed and sustained when economic, political, and social-cultural changes brought about by modernization dramatically change the power balance in the society through creating new classes in support of democratic transition. Modernization dramatically changes the power balance in the society through creating new classes in support of democratic transition. Their attitudes and preferences undermine the traditional agrarian relationships and generate a new set of political values and orientations that usher in democracy. When the pro-democratic force begins to dominate in number, political transformation will take place. Socioeconomic structures and environment of a country and its relations with neighbors also confer on a trustworthy insight into the political and democratization processes. To illustrate this, Bhutan’s social, political, and economic structures are studied in minutiae in this chapter. In order to explain this, the first part of chapter 1 has captured in depth the social structures of Bhutan with stress on location, people, and its ethno-demographic characteristics, language, religion, culture, and occupation. The second part takes the discourse on regime typology with focus on the historical-political background before 1624, the unifier regimes during the pre-Wangchuk monarchy era (1594–1907), the monarchy-bureaucratic–authoritarian regime (1907–1952), the monarchy-liberal–conservative regime (1952–2006), and the royal semi-authoritarianism electoral regime (2006–present). The third part has mapped out Bhutan’s economic landscape with a major thrust on the economic backdrop before Wangchuk monarchy of 1594 to 1907, a glimpse of
the economic setting for 1907 to 1952, and the disaggregating economic dynamics from 1952 to the present. The last part of chapter 1 explores Bhutan’s economic and sociocultural relations with neighbors India and China. This chapter concludes with the notion that Bhutan today is an immensely imbalanced nation with a relatively advanced economy with a repressive social-political system, what is called “The Bhutanese Paradox: Economic Prosperity with Socio-Political Suffocation.”

The second chapter modestly attempts to search and locate for explanation of a different perspective on the democratic struggles and political opposition. It attempts to delve into the power struggle between Zhabdrung and kings, the Sharchop Rebellion, the Lhotshampa Rebellion, the birth of contemporary political organizations, and the democratic movement in the South of Bhutan and in the East of Bhutan. It also draws attention to conspiracies, power struggles, and conflicts between the kings, Dorji family and conservative elites, Yangki family and Wangchuk family, and between Yab Ugen/queens and Wangchuk family.

The third chapter reflects on the state response in the form of repression and social control. It has extensively dealt with issues such as the royal regime’s tools of repression and social control to eliminate political opposition, mobilizing resistance to the authoritarian royal regime, the oppositional political challenges to Bhutan state since 1990s, shaping perceptions of the international community on the Bhutanese democratic struggle, and saying the unsayable—why do Bhutanese people fall short in supporting the democratic movement?

The fourth chapter maps out the mirages of jigmecracy to contemplate that semi-authoritarian jigmecracy has been introduced as cosmetic surgery and preemptive measures to democratic political struggles. The chapter makes a meticulous attempt to explain the basic features of democracy: the coronation as reincarnations of Buddha and Zhabdrung and kingly affairs of Wangchuk kings; king and constitution; the royalist political parties and the challenge of legitimation; delimitation of constituencies; electoral process and political participation; the bureaucrats, political elites and struggles for power; media and freedom of press; politics and violations of human rights in royal democracy; and civil society in Bhutan and surfing the corruptions and land scams in the monarchical democracy.

Chapter 5 seeks to explore and understand the politics behind the curtain of royal democracy.
The focus of chapter 6 is to give a mild effort to explore and analyze the rhetoric of monarchical liberalization, and gives cautionary notes on democratic prospects in Bhutan and to consider that Bhutanese kings are modernizers and not democratic reformers.

Chapter 7 deals with India’s role and constraints in promoting semi-authoritarianism democracy in Bhutan, and maps out the dilemmas of balancing defense of higher universal values and interests with major focus in geostrategic and real politics of India in Bhutan.

Chapter 8 provides a way forward to drain the swamp of predicaments by restructuring new democratic architecture from the wheels of monarchy and elites to webs of Bhutanese citizens.

Finally, the conclusion of the book attempts to crystallize the content. The end of the book includes the glossary of Bhutanese expressions, bibliography, and index.

NOTES

27. See Marina Ottaway, Martha Brill Olcott, “Challenge of Semi-Authoritarianism,” Carnegie Paper

29. Bhutan is the only country in South Asia to measure happiness. Gross National Happiness (GNH) is an attempt to define quality of life in more holistic and psychological terms than Gross National Product. The concept of GNH is based on the premise that true development of human society takes place when material and spiritual development materialize side by side to complement and reinforce one another, but the telling and illuminating analysis in this book asks whose happiness? In April 2012, the Bhutanese model of GNH has been showcased on the United Nations Agenda in accordance with Resolution 65/309.

30. In foreign narratives, Bhutan represents the country of a fairy tale. The idea of “Shangri-La” is owed to a fiction authored by a British writer James Hilton in the early 1930s. In the book titled *The Lost Horizon*, Hilton describes an exotic mythical utopia in the Himalayan mountains of Asia, where harmony and happiness reigned supreme. However, this idealized construction of Bhutan as “the last Shangri-La,” although enormously appealing to Western nostalgia, ignores the contemporary challenges facing modern Bhutan.


32. On this subject, see David L. Luechauer, “GNH Begins at Home,” *Kuensel*, August 11, 2012. [http://www.kuenselonline.com/2011/?cat=4](http://www.kuenselonline.com/2011/?cat=4) (accessed September 10, 2012). Luechauer has critically encapsulated what this romanticized land is in following words: “Come on Bhutan, did you ever really think the world was buying what you were selling? The only people that naïve would be the people, who have never set foot in your land, or have been escorted around on neatly guided and well scripted tours. At present, after nearly six months of working/teaching and traveling about the most progressive and developed side of Bhutan—call it the Punakha-Paro-Phuentsholing (3P) triangle—I will honestly say that Bhutan isn’t and wasn’t in the position to tell the rest of us how to conduct their affairs, or that they all needed to embrace an untested model of economic development—Therefore, I am very sorry, Bhutan, I love your people. The warmth, which my family and I have been received, is second to none! But it’s time to get real and get honest. Please devote your time, efforts and preciously scarce resources to getting your own house in order. You have to have something tangible to offer before someone can buy.”

33. Bhutan conjures up in the mind’s eye idyllic images of a Shangri-La. In line with this fairy-tale perception, it has sought to propagate the concept of Gross National Happiness as a serious index for measuring development. In the late 1980s, a “one nation, one people” campaign, leading to a “Bhutanization” program, resulted in a large number of people of Nepali origin, known as “Lhotshampas” fleeing Bhutan. However, there is today a realization in that country that the idea label needs to be matched by performance.


35. It forgets the realities of subsistence living—high infant mortality, low life expectancy, contaminated water, parasitic infestation, increasing unemployment, increasing drugs and substances uses, increasing suicide cases, rising inflation and currency crisis, ethnic cleansing and refugee crises, crony capitalism, and so on.

Chapter One

Social Structures, Historical Background, Regime Typology, and Economic Landscape of Bhutan

Democracy is a form of politics, which can only function with an appropriate socioeconomic infrastructure. Democracy could be instituted and sustained when economic, social, and cultural changes brought about by modernization considerably change the power balance in the society through creating new classes in support of democratic transition. Modernization significantly changes the power balance in the society through creating new classes in support of democratic transition. Their attitudes and preferences undermine the traditional agrarian relationships and generate a new set of political values and orientations that usher in democracy. When the pro-democratic force begins to dominate in number, political transformation will take place. The concerns with development were essentially a concern with a program of social, political, and economic transformation as well as successful transition both institutional and ideological from tradition to modernity.

The assumptions were that developing and modernizing countries simultaneously and even smoothly achieve economic growth, greater equality, democracy, stability, and greater national autonomy. Samuel Huntington noted that the notion erroneously assumed that “all good things go together.” However, the development and modernization proved no guarantee of either political stability or reduction of conflict and violence. The connotations attributed to development can be extensive and diverse. Even within the discipline of political science, there has been a tendency to take an all-encompassing view of development. Lucian Pye has elaborated on at least ten ways in which development can be understood. Pye’s elaborations are so wide ranging that they, in fact, demarcate the boundaries of the concept of development itself. If one were to look for the connotations of development, then one has to go no further but look into Pye’s elaborations which encompass social, economic, and political development in a single framework.
Nevertheless, it also points to the difficulties in conceptualizing the concept of development. The essence of the concept of development revolves around political modernization, economic development, and social change, but the normative priorities of the concept seem to stress stability. The central thesis of the concept of development is that social and political change occurs according to a pre-established pattern, the logic and direction of which are known. It is a nonlinear movement from the traditional to the modern. It involves the shift from a predominantly rural, agricultural society to an increasingly urban industrial society, characterized by a cash-and-market economy, economic growth, high literacy, greater social and occupational differentiation, and mobility. Succinctly, development in Bhutan refers to issues such as an improvement in living standards and access to all basic needs such that a person has enough food, water, shelter, clothing, health, and education; a stable political, social, and economic environment associated with political, social, and economic freedom such as equitable ownership of land and property; the ability to make free and informed choices that are not coerced; and the ability to participate in a democratic environment to determine one’s own future as well as potential for full development of people to lead productive and creative lives in accord with their need and interest. In other words, development should be inclusive politically, economically, and socioculturally.

To illustrate this, Bhutan’s social, political, and economic structures and progression are studied in some details in this chapter. The first part attempts to delve into Bhutan’s social structures and put forward epigrammatic elucidation on location, people, and its ethnodemographic characteristics, language, religion, culture, and occupation, and so forth. The next part of chapter 1 has captured in-depth the regime typology with a focus on the historical-political background before 1624, the unifier regimes during the pre-Wangchuk monarchy era (1594–1907), the monarchy-bureaucratic–authoritarian regime (1907–1952), the monarchy-liberal–conservative regime (1952–2006), and the royal semi-authoritarianism electoral regime (2006–present). The third part maps Bhutan’s economic landscape with major thrust on the economic terrain before the Wangchuk monarchy (1594–1907), a glimpse of the economic setting from 1907 to 1952, and the disaggregating economic dynamics from 1952 to the present. The last section of chapter 1 explores Bhutan’s economic and sociocultural relations with neighbors India and China followed by conclusion to shed light on the “Bhutanese Paradox of Economic Prosperity with Sociopolitical Suffocation.”
The interactive interpretation adopted by contemporary political science considers power to be a matter of human relationships, the cause of certain behavior, a restriction on other people’s freedom, and an unequal relationship. Structural analysis is concerned with frameworks that vary in the extent to which they are complex and hierarchical, that describe the status and respective roles of members of a society, and prescribe how they interact and distribute scarce resources between them. Therefore, to understand a political system, it is necessary to understand its social structures and its unequal and hierarchical social relationships, which have the potential to, and may actually, lead to conflict. Social structures vary from one society to another, but derive from the same social constructs: classification on biological grounds (sex, age, kinship, etc.), which has more significance in traditional societies and is highlighted by anthropology and classification based on socioeconomic differences (qualifications, occupation, income, etc.) in modern societies, underscored by sociology.

Anthropologists invariably mention Bhutan as a treasure house of indigenous cultural conceptions and living practices. The ethnic diversity and richness of its multifarious culture is due to its situation at the junction of Indo-Tibetan, Indo-Malayan, and Indo-Aryan civilizations. Cultural determinism argues that cultural values order modes of social and economic organization, including patterns of political relationships, political participation, citizenship, and government. As a corollary of this, societies or regions that embrace a common cultural heritage can be said to have evolved discrete systems of political and social arrangements distinct from and sometimes in opposition to or in conflict with the rest of the world. Because of this, these culturally embedded arrangements have been argued to explain and underpin such important issues as relative economic performance and social cohesion, and to determine crucial issues of international relations between cultural groups. The first part attempts to delve into Bhutan’s social structures and put forward brief clarification on the nomenclature, location, people and its ethnographic characteristics, language, religion, culture, and occupation.

The Nomenclature: Bhutan
The history of Bhutan is deeply wrapped in mystery. Thus, there are various theories regarding the origin of the name Bhutan. One theory states that it is derived from the Sanskrit word “Bhotana,” which means “the end of the land of the Bhots or Bhotas.” It is the term through which traditional India knew about Tibetans. Thus, Bhotanta stands for the region that lay to the Southern end of Tibet. The second derivative regarding the origin of the word Bhutan is said to be from “Bhu-uttan,” or Highland. This is plausible due to great heights at which the country lies. The third version as per Bhutanese scholars Lopon Nado and Lopen Pemala, Bhutan is called the land of Lho Mon or “Mon to the South.” The term South is used because it is the state that lies to the South of Lhasa (Tibet).

The most popular and existing theory, which describes the social, religious, and cultural character of Bhutanese people, particularly of Western Bhutan and which can be fully appreciated and understood in the framework of the Drukpa ethnology and cultural pattern, is “Bhutan.”

Location

Bhutan is a small country. Bhutan is situated along the southern slopes of the great Himalayan range between 26.5 degrees North latitude and 88 degrees and 92 degrees East longitude. Traveling across the North-South axis, one finds a small Southern strip of low foothills at 160 meters above sea level to some of the rugged Bhutanese terrain ranges and Himalayan peaks in the north at over 7,500 meters. The kingdom borders the Indian states of Sikkim, West Bengal, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, and Chinese Tibet. It has a 470-kilometer-long border with Tibet (China’s Xizang Autonomous Region) to the North and Northwest, and shares 605 kilometers with the Indian state of Sikkim to the West, West Bengal to the Southwest, Assam to the South and Southeast, and Arunachal Pradesh to the East. The Indian state of Sikkim separates Bhutan from Nepal, while West Bengal separates Bhutan from Bangladesh. The border with Tibet traditionally follows the watershed of the Chumbi Valley in the Northwest and the crest of the Himalayas in the North, whereas the Southern border with India was established by treaty with the British in the nineteenth century and follows the line made by the Himalayan foothills with the plains.

It has land area of only 46,500 square kilometers, a little larger than Switzerland, with roughly nine hundred thousand inhabitants. The reliable publication of the Information Service of India on Bhutan confirmed the aforesaid area and also gave the length and breadth in the following words: “Bhutan has been an area of about [eighteen thousand] square miles, roughly
rectangular in shape and extending about [two hundred] air miles from east to west and about [one hundred] square miles from north to south.”

It is wedged between two dual economic juggernauts, India and China. This rugged landscape is landlocked and historically has been located in a region geopolitical competition and occupies a place of great geopolitical and geostrategic importance. Despite its precarious geopolitical position, Bhutan was never colonized.

Administratively, it is divided into four regions: the Eastern Zone, the Western Zone, the Southern Zone, and the Central Zone. The above four regions are divided into twenty Dzongkhags, which vary from 100 square kilometers in Punakha to 4,260 square kilometers in Trashigang. The Dzongkhags are subdivided into smaller unit of 15 Dungkhags and 205 Gewogs, as at present.

The climatic conditions vary due to the mountainous nature of the country. Bhutan has three broad climatic and physiographic zones: the Southern belt made up of the Himalayan foothills adjacent to a narrow belt of flatland along the Indian border, the inner Himalayas consisting of main river valleys and steep mountains, and the high Himalayas featuring alpine meadows and snow-capped mountains. The country is also endowed with a river system that has an estimated potential to generate thirty-five thousand megawatts of hydroelectricity. The country has one of the richest biodiversity in the world with about 3,281 plant species per ten thousand square kilometers, and has been declared as part of one of the ten global biodiversity “hotspots.”

**People: Ethnodemographic Characteristics**

Bhutan is bounded on the West and East by two corridors which cut across the ethnic divisions: the valley of Chumbi of Tibet in the West and the Monyul corridor to the East, which is now part of Arunachal Pradesh of India. Between these two corridors lie the principal Bhutanese valleys inhabited by a medley of peoples broadly classified by the language they speak. Various waves of immigrants mainly from Tibet in the North and India in the South make up the ethnic mosaic and variety of population in Bhutan. The location-specific context of geography and its topographical extremes along with its long isolation are responsible for highly variable and staggering stock of human life in Bhutan. The ethnohistory of Bhutan is therefore an intricate subject that will require much effort to piece together.

Bhutan is the least populated country of South Asia. The total population figures of Bhutan is highly confusing and controversial. Various authors and
government publications have given multitude of figures. To add more fuel to already vexed problem, the political and refugee crisis since the 1990s have provided the leeway to manipulate the figures by regime. The Statistical Year Book of Bhutan 2014 estimated a population of 745,153 in 2014, with an average household size of 4.6 and a population growth rate of 1.3 percent. Most of the authors stated that Bhutan has a population of more than one million. The one million figure may be too high; the real figure is somewhere in a range of nine hundred thousand.

Several ethnic groups inhabit the mountain kingdom. It is a multilingual, multireligious, and multiethnic country of South Asia. The ethnic composition of Bhutan is difficult to establish. Bhutanese census data does not provide information on ethnicity. Most authors identify three main categories of ethnicity. Three main ethnic groups called the Sharchops (people from the East), Ngalungs (people from the West), and Lhotsampas (people from the South) constitute the population of Bhutan. In addition, there are several smaller ethnic communities mainly distinguished by their dialects. These include Bumthaps, Mangdeps, and Khengpas in central Bhutan; Kurtoeps in the East; Brokpas and Dakpas in the Northeast; Layaps and Lunaps in the Northwest; and Doyas in the South.

All the three ethnic groups have distinct identity based on culture and religion. The Sharchop and Khengs live mostly in Eastern and central Bhutan, the Ngalungs inhabit the Western part, and the Nepalese live in Southern Bhutan. Demographic statistics are controversial in Bhutan at present, and all such figures should be treated with caution. Estimates of the Ngalung vary from 10 percent to 25 percent, for Sharchops and Kheng 30 percent to 40 percent, and for the Nepalese 25 percent to 53 percent.

Language

For a small country, Bhutan owns a disproportionate number of languages. As many as twenty-three local languages are spoken in Bhutan. Accurate figures for the proportions of the population represented by these ethnic categories are therefore difficult to determine. While many languages are spoken in Bhutan, three major language groups are dominant: Dzongkha, spoken by the Ngalung; Tsangla, the language of the Sharchop; and Nepali, spoken by the Lhotshampa. Dzongkha is the national language, although Tsangla is often the lingua franca in the Sharchop-dominated East, with Nepali playing the same role in the South.
Existing information on language is highly predisposed, projecting the majority of ruling elites. In one language survey conducted by Van Driem, a Dzongkha scholar, who had worked for the Government of Bhutan, the Government Language Survey shows that there are approximately 600,000 people in Bhutan with Dzongkha speakers (160,000), Nepali speakers (156,000), Sharchop/Tsangla speakers (138,000), and Kheng speakers (80,000). The other smaller Tibeto-Burman languages such as Bumthangkha (30,000 speakers), Chocangacakha (20,000), Dzalakha (15,000), Khengkha (40,000), Kurtokha (10,000), Lepcha (35,000), and Nyenkha (10,000), among others, also exists in Bhutan.\(^\text{30}\) However, this survey is highly subjective and does not specify whether the base of the survey was fluency, conversational ability, or both. Moreover, it is not explicit whether the Nepali speakers of 1,560,000 include or exclude the more than 100,000 exiled Bhutanese. The figure for Tsangla speaker is too low in proportion to their population.\(^\text{31}\) Both Aris and Rahul write that the Sharchops form a clear majority of the population.\(^\text{32}\) Even the Parmanand estimate the percentage of Sharchop as 44 percent of Bhutan’s total population and the Ngalungs as about 28 percent.\(^\text{33}\)

Dzongkha is the national language of Bhutan. It is originated from Choke, the liturgical/clerical language of Tibet. It is derived from Dzong, which means fortress, and Kha, which means language. Dzongkha could be described as a “polished” form of the Ngalung language and has some 130,000 speakers according to figures available for 2003.\(^\text{34}\) The central parts of the country tend to have strong links and affinities with the Ngalung.\(^\text{35}\) It is the language of ruling elite, which constitutes about 10 to 25 percent imposed on other ethnic groups, comprising about 85 percent of the total population. Fernand claims that:

The vast diversity from a cultural, religious and linguistic point of view just within the broad Tibeto-Burman family is somewhat misleading. Despite not constituting a majority in terms of the overall population, the Ngalungs and central populations have in practical terms imposed their modified language as the state’s only national language and it is similarly their culture which is deemed almost exclusively to be “Bhutanese.” The Ngalungs are clearly dominant politically and predominate in government and the civil service, and their cultural norms and dress have been declared by the Royal Government of Bhutan to be the standard for all citizens. While the cultural, linguistic and religious tableau of Bhutan is one of great diversity, this is not recognized to any significant extent in the country’s legal regime, including the constitution. The vision of Bhutan as a society is, despite its diversity, currently defensive: in order to ensure its “cultural imperative,” a monolingual, mono-religious view of the Kingdom is enforced, sometimes against the will of many of its large minority populations and in breach of a number of fundamental human rights.\(^\text{36}\)

Since the accessible figures are contentious, it cannot be exactly estimated how many people speak which language. Moreover, many Bhutanese speak two or
more than two languages and are bi- or trilingual.

Religion

By tradition, Bhutan is a Buddhist Drukpa monarchy. The state religion of Bhutan is the Drukpa sect of Kargyupa, a branch of Mahayana Buddhism. It is based on the doctrine of Bodhisattava. It came to Bhutan from Tibet, which is characterized by mysticism, black magic, and the worship of incarnate Lama. It is mostly pursued by Ngalungs of Western Bhutan. The Sharchop pursue a different section of Buddhism called Nyingmapa Buddhism, distinct from a Kargupa sect of Buddhism practiced in Western Bhutan. The Lhotsampas in Southern Bhutan are Hindus, and they practice the Hinduism akin to one found in India and Nepal. Bhutan is the only country to maintain Mahayana Buddhism in its Tantric Vajrayana form as the official religion. Buddhism transects all strata of society, underpinning multiple aspects of the culture. Indeed, religion is the focal point for the arts and festivals. The presence of so many monasteries, temples and stupas, monks and trulkus (reincarnations of high lamas) is indicative of the overarching role religion plays throughout the nation.

Bhutan is home to the centuries-old “Ka-Nying Zhungdrel” tradition. The state supports the Drukpa Kargyupa institution. The Nyingmapa sect is independent. Left on its own, the Nyingmapa tradition was on the decline even though His Holiness Dodrupchen Rinpoche repaired many old monasteries and established Nyingmapa learning centers in Pema Gastshel, Trashigang, Mongar, and Samdrup Jongkhar to reinstate to its earlier glory. Until 1987, there was no government interference in the functioning of the Nyingmapa institutions. Thereafter, the King Jigme (K4) began overtly espousing the Drukpa Kargyupa sect and began not just neglecting but persecuting the Nyingmapa Sect. The queens and their families, being devout Kargyupa, have influenced the kings into supporting the Drukpa Kargyupa over the Nyingmapa sect. In the 1990s, many Nyingmapa learning centers and monasteries were passionately converted into Drukpa Kargyupa centers. This policy continued, with the latest being Youngpula Gonpa in 2006. The Nyingmapa sect was never persecuted under the rule of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal nor under the rule of his successive reincarnations and the successive Desids, Je Khenpo, and first three kings. Secular as the state vocalizes, even diversity of Mahayana Buddhism faces discrimination as Kargyupa cherishes state patronage with their institutions housed in all districts as par with district administrations while Nyingmapa and Hinduism lacks similar state patronage. Nyingmapa and Hinduism had been
undermined and emasculated due to “religious colonization” by the state-imposed religion, Kargyupa.

The occupation of Tibet by Chinese Communist forces in 1950 has been seen as leaving the kingdom as the last standing bastion of an ancient cultural history. It has been reported that the whole enormous area of Bhutan, which was once the spirited domain of Tibetan culture and religion, stretching from Ladakh in the West to the borders of the Chinese provinces of Szechuan and Yunnan in the East, from the Himalayas in the South to the Mongolian steppes and the vast wastes of Northern Tibet, now only seems to survive as the one resolute and self-contained representative of a fast-disappearing civilization. It is this fragile survival of a “fast-disappearing civilization,” which may help explain the Bhutanese government’s policies, programs, and especially the adoption of a new constitution, which seems to exclude any acknowledgment of the kingdom’s diversity and any concession to many of its minorities as inquired into and disengaged in the subsequent chapters. Yet the vulnerability of Bhutan as a political entity, the “threats” to its survival, and the reasons why the Government of Bhutan has apparently gone to extremes to exclude or at the very least discriminate against many of its own citizens only make sense in the context of a cultural, linguistic, or religious threat, and it is here that the issue of minorities and the configurations of the country’s population become matters of controversy in Bhutan today.

Culture

Culture implies the linkages between the past and present in various forms of human life like dance, painting, printing, arts and crafts, and architecture. It occupies an overriding importance in any society. Bhutan is a land of rich mosaic of cultures, lifestyles, languages, and belief systems.

Bhutan’s traditional culture is alive in its performing arts, such as dance and music, which are integral parts of ceremonies and festivals all over the country. Unlike many countries, traditional arts, age-old ceremonies, festivals, and social conduct and structures are not remnants of a bygone age. Traditional arts and crafts are still practiced as they were hundreds of years ago. Vibrant festivals are celebrated and social principles like the Driglam Namzha (age-old etiquette and code of conduct) are still evident because they are enforced by state and continue to have an influence in the daily lives of the people.

Bhutanese language and literature, arts and crafts, drama, music, ceremonies and events, architecture, and basic social and cultural values draw their essence
Hundreds of monasteries, stupas, religious institutions, prayer flags, and prayer wheels mark the countryside, providing a strong infrastructure and atmosphere for the teachings of their living faith. In addition, performances such as dance, songs, traditional instrumental music, and drama based on biographies of religious personalities hold a special place in the lives of the people as they play an important role in national, village, or domestic functions and festivals. Traditional religiosity, instead of modern culture, still dominates the countryside and small towns, where the majority of the population lives. Secular culture remains limited to only parts of the urban middle class and the minuscule educated bourgeoisie.

The chief religious works of Bhutanese literature include the Kangyur, the translated commandments, and the Tengyur, the translated doctrinal commentaries. These are the two great lamiac encyclopedias. Moreover, a vast mass of historical and biographical literature grew up in Bhutan during seventeenth and eighteenth century CE. These include Lhoyi Chhoejung, Namthar of Sindhu Gyab, Namthar of Phajo Drugom Shigpo, the book of Dung Chhoeje, and Gyalrab Selvimelong, the history book of Eastern Bhutan.

Both India and Tibet have influenced Bhutan’s art and craft. Bhutan is well known for its articles of brass and bronze. Almost all the Bhutanese art is symbolic, nonsecular, and a rare blending of Tibetan, Indian, and Chinese traditional styles characteristic in the Bhutanese setting. It mostly derives lore and Tantric mythology. It is highly decorative and ornamental, and is particularly located in its monastic centers: dzongs, lhakhangs, monasteries, temples, and chhortens. Religious themes dominate all Bhutanese forms of art. It is rich in color and is comprehensive and dynamic in its exclusive representative of Bhutanese religious concepts, beliefs, and way of life. Its paintings, such as thangkas, the mandalas, frescoes, murals, and miniature paintings exemplifying its manuscripts, have a distinctive pattern of their own. Intricate wall paintings and thangkas (wall hangings), most historical writing, and fine sculpted images all have a religious theme. All are viewed as sacred, and newly commissioned paintings and sculptures are consecrated through a special ceremony whereby they come to personify the respective deities.

Bhutan is very rich in the sphere of architecture. Chhortens (stupas) housing the sacred relics dot the landscape. Goenpas (monasteries) and lhakhangs (temples), some dating back to as early as the eighth century, are the focal point of each village. Bhutanese arts are deeply imbued with a strong sense of morality, with many art forms epitomizing the eternal struggle between the
forces of good and evil. Chhorten (stupas) mani walls, temples, monasteries, fortresses, palaces, and village houses constitute a landscape, much unique to Bhutan. Wood is used in maximum quantity in Bhutanese architecture. Bhutanese architecture, particularly in its chhortens and lhakhangs, conforms to certain scriptural cannons both in design and workmanship. The Bhutanese architectural landscape is made up of chhortens, stonewalls, temples, monasteries, fortresses, mansions, and houses. Associated with a number of clear-cut architectural concepts and building types rooted in Tibetan Buddhism, there is a strong association between state, religious, and secular forms. What makes it quite unique is the degree of uniformity, with all structures corresponding to traditional designs.

Bhutanese classical dance is reflected by their religious mask-pageants and ritual dances. Bhutan still retains its folkloristic treasures having their roots in the dawn of history. Traditionally, most of these were initiated first by Terton Padmalingpa in the fifteenth century and thereafter by Zhabdrung Rimpoché in the mid-seventeenth century as an accompaniment to the prayers of the protector’s God Mahakala in the Punakha Dzong, which is famous as Pun-Domchhoe and later Kunga Gyaltschen, reincarnation of Jampel Dorji, started a pattern for prayers to the protectors Goddess Shri Devi in the Thimpu Dzong. Amongst the most celebrated religious dances are the Shang Chham (Black Hat Dance), the Degyed Chham (Spirit Dance), the Sinje Chham (Yamaraj Dance), the Le-Goen Chham (Dance of the Protector God), the Lhamo Tsokhor Chham (Dance of Protector Goddess), the Serdeng Ber-Kor (Procession Dance), the Goenpo Mang-Cham (Dance of the Protector God and Others), the Dur-Dag Chham (Dance of the Shamashan Lord), Tum Ngam Chham (the Angry Mood Dance), and Guru Tshengyed (the Dance of the Eight Gurus).

The most popular ritual and festival dances are Chhoe-Je (semi-religious ritual dance), the Dam-Ngen Chham (guitar dance), the Ragsha Chham (Yamaraj Dance), Damitse Nga Chham (drum dance), the Shau Shachhi (Dance of the Deer and the Hunting Dogs), Pachham (hero dance), and Achara Chham (yogi dance). Almost all the Bhutanese dances are symbolic and represent religious and folk traditions of the Buddhist country’s past. It is being performed with thunderous steps having great rhythmic vigor and grace of bodily movements.

The most popular sport is archery, and it is the most loved national sport in Bhutan. Soccer, basketball, volleyball, golf, badminton, tennis, and so forth, are very common in modern-day Bhutan.
The distinguishing *food habits* comprise rice, dried beef or pork, and chilies in West and East, and typical Indian (Northeast) and Nepali dishes in Southern Bhutan.

The official *dress* is Gho and Kira worn by males and females, respectively. It is compulsory by law for all Bhutanese to wear the traditional dress: for men and boys the gho, a long gown hitched up to the knee so that its lower half resembles a skirt, for women and girls the kira, an ankle-length robe somewhat resembling a kimono. Women are fond of various kinds of necklaces and ornaments.

*Family and Kinship Structure*

Most of the population is concentrated in the valleys, while large areas at higher altitudes in the North of the country are virtually empty except for nomadic herders. Most Bhutanese still live in villages in an extended family system or maintain strong links with their rural families. The average size of the household or family is estimated to be 4.6. The number of houses per village varies from two to one hundred, with an average of forty-three.

Bhutan’s traditional society has been defined as both patriarchal and matriarchal, and the member held in highest esteem served as the family’s head. Bhutan also has been described as feudalistic and characterized by the absence of strong social stratification. In pre-modern times, there were three broad classes: the monastic community, the leadership of which was the nobility; lay civil servants, who ran the government apparatus; and farmers, the largest class, living in self-sufficient villages. In the more militaristic pre-modern era, Bhutan also had an underclass of prisoners of war and their descendants, who were generally treated as serfs or even as slaves. In modern times, society was organized around joint family units, and a class division existed based on occupation and, in time, social status. With the introduction of foreign practices in recent centuries and increasing job mobility outside the village, however, emphasis has been placed on nuclear family units.

Marriages in Bhutan are more a matter of convenience than conviction, but it is the most important institution affecting the role of women. Both men and women enjoy freedom to choose their partners. Love marriages are common in urban areas, but arranged marriages also take place. In the Lhotshampa ethnic group, women join their husband’s families after marriage, but among the Ngalung and Sharchop, there is no rule that women have to move to their husband’s house. Often, the couple moves to the woman’s house. However, the increasing trend today is that the couple leads an independent life but continues
to keep very close ties to his/her natal family. Divorce is socially and religiously well accepted, and the divorce rate is very high.

The percentage of married population is found to be the highest in the middle-aged group. The divorced and separated population is found to be the highest among women in the age group of thirty to thirty-four years followed by that of twenty-five to twenty-nine years at 7.3 percent and 5.7 percent, respectively. The widowed population constitutes 4.7 percent of the total population, consisting of 3.2 percent males and 6.2 percent females. Remarriage of divorcees and widows is also common practice. The law prohibits polyandry and polygamy, but there are a few cases of polyandry among the Brokpas of Mera-Sakten, where if brothers’ mutually agree, they can share one wife among them. Also, polygamy is seen as acceptable among a few, including the fourth King Jigme Singye, who married four sisters. Bhutanese women enjoy equal rights with men.

There is no rigid class system in Bhutan, and social and educational opportunities are not affected by rank or birth. Monks are held in great respect and play an important part in community life. Representatives of the monk body are present at all important occasions. In the past, it was common for one son from each family to enter the monastic order, a custom that is less prevalent today. Social status is based on a family’s economic situation. Except among the Hindu Nepalese in Southern Bhutan, there is no caste system. The Southern community akin to Nepali society in India and Nepal is generally patriarchal in structure; sons are expected to take care of their parents and provide for them financially and emotionally. Although Bhutanese were endogamous by tradition, modern practices and even royal decrees encouraged ethnic integration in the late twentieth century. Primogeniture dictated the right of inheritance traditionally, although in some central areas the eldest daughter was the lawful successor. In contemporary Bhutan, however, inheritance came to be more equally distributed among all children of a family. A system of titles, depending on age, degree of familiarity, and social or official status, denotes ranks and relationships among members of society. The title *dasho*, for example, is an honorific used by a prince of the royal house, a commoner who marries a princess, a deputy minister, other senior government officials, and others in positions of authority. Both sexes also wear scarves or shawls, white for commoners and carefully specified colors, designs, and manners of folding for higher-ranking individuals. Only the Druk Gyalpo and the Je Khenpo are allowed to wear the honorific saffron scarf. Other officials are distinguished by the color of the scarves they wear: orange for ministers, blue for National
Assembly and National Council members, and red or maroon for high religious and civil officials, district officers, judges, or anyone holding the title of dasho. Stripes on scarves of the same base color denote greater or lesser ranks.

**Occupations**

Bhutan is mostly an agrarian economy. More than 90 percent of the population is engaged in agriculture. The contribution to gross domestic product (GDP) by major sector is as follows: primary, 16 percent; secondary, 42 percent; and tertiary, 42 percent in 2013. The total labor force for 2013 was 345,786 (male 186,403 and female 159,383), and the unemployment rate was 2.9 percentage (rural 1.5 and urban 6.3). The labor force participation rate for 2013 was 65.3 percentage. The total number of civil servants was 25,306. The labor force size increased from 256,895 persons in 2005 to 289,583 in 2010 (an increase of 32,688 individuals). It is estimated to reach 318,688 in 2015, an addition of 61,973 persons. The Labor Force Survey 2013 reported that the agriculture sector employs over 55 percent of the total employed persons. A total of 335,870 were employed, and 9,916 were found to be unemployed out of a total projected population of 745,939, making the unemployment rate at the national level of 2.9 percent as per the Labor Force Survey of 2013. As per the statistical yearbook of Bhutan 2014, the demography of 2014 in number includes 375,554 males and 345,125 females, with a total population of 745,153. The population by age group in 2014 included 227,254 zero to fourteen-year-olds; 480,347 fifteen- to sixty-four-year-olds; 37,553 sixty-five-year-olds and older; and 745,153 total. The overall sex ratio in 2014 was 108.4, and population density (person per square kilometer) was 19.4. The median age of the population in (years) in 2014 was 24.7, and the aging index (elderly per one hundred children) for 2014 was 15.9. The total dependency ratio was 52.8; the child dependency ratio was 45.5, and the old age dependency ratio was 7.3.

**Conclusion**

The study in this section has explored and portrayed social structures and power relationships by which power is exercised in Bhutanese society. The study attempts to identify and understand the dynamics of the current sociocultural situation by analyzing the role and agenda of strategic players and processes at work in Bhutanese society. If one looks at the social structure of Bhutan, the conditions that might trigger a transition appear almost as non-existent. It is still a traditional society. Not only is the majority of the population employed in
agriculture, there also exists almost no noteworthy middle class that could facilitate change in line with the arguments made by modern sociologists. The modernization in Bhutan took a completely different turn and shape from that of most developing countries. The political changes have been very low. The rising level of education among a growing and youthful population—along with globalization and social networking—may perhaps contribute to the emergence of new social forces. Emerging sociodemographic changes occurring within the country have caused an increase in rural-urban migration, and as a result, an increase in urban youth unemployment. Modernization and the introduction of mass media have also caused a significant transformation in Bhutan’s youth culture to include Western influences of materialism and violence. However, the political will and pressure from the public have not yet reached critical mass.

One of the strategic issues identified was the reality of power within Bhutanese society. There is a need to analyze comprehensively the political, economic, and social structures and power relationships within formal and informal decision-making processes at all levels of society, as well as their implications for Bhutan. Analysis of power relationships and social structures in Bhutan reveals as a state, they are shifting slowly, but that traditional relationship and structures still have a strong influence, with consequences for the democratization process. Due to deepening social polarization created by the hegemony of the political class dominating the systems, the social forces attempt to open new routes to political access, communication, participation, and activism. We don’t find the emergence of social movements as better catalysts of democratic functioning in authoritarian societies of Bhutan nor social movement acting as a beacon of post-modern, post-industrial, or post-capitalist society to de-traditionally modern society by establishing the sanctity of living species and conserving the natural bases of human life.

**REGIME TYPOLOGY IN BHUTAN: DIFFERENT FORM, ONE LANGUAGE**

Notwithstanding the appearance of liberalization and democratization in recent years, the authoritarian exercise of power, power which is unaccountable to democratic institutions and processes of law, has been an abiding feature of different regime forms. It entails moving beyond a conventional analysis of democratization, and its treasure hunt for the democratic actor requires a multifaceted periodization of regime forms, decoupled from the teleology
implicit in democratic transitology. The political system of each country is unique. It is unique in the sense that it is the product of historical experiences and cultural, social, economic, and political environments of the country. It may possess some broad patterns similar to those existing in other countries, but its spirit, its essence of behavioral pattern is peculiar to the land in which it operates. A political system created to subserve an authoritarian regime will be incompatible for a democratic and liberal political system.

This section endeavors to exemplify regime types that have emerged since the late seventh century CE in Bhutan, each possessing a different mix of liberalism and authoritarianism. To put the flesh on the skeleton of regime typology in the context of Bhutan, it is proposed, somewhat schematically, that four distinct regime forms have emerged in the post-1594 political landscape. First, unifier regimes (1594–1907) that united the country and set the rules of the game; secondly, the monarchical-bureaucratic–authoritarian regime (1907–1952); thirdly, the emergent monarchical-liberal–conservative regimes (1952–2006); and fourthly, the royal semi-authoritarianism electoral regime (2006–present). This regime typology is discussed against the backdrop of historical-political background before 1594. This regime typology should be understood as an analytical tool for better understanding of subsequent chapters.

**Historical-Political Background before 1594**

There has been little scholarly investigation in the political history of Bhutan. There are hardly any books that critically examine the ancient period. The early history of Bhutan is interpretative and subject to change over time. “Bhutan’s history, however, has proven especially flexible.”45 Although knowledge of prehistoric Bhutan has yet to emerge through archaeological study, stone tools and weapons, remnants of large stone structures, and megaliths that may have been used for boundary markers or rituals provide evidence of civilization as early as 2000 BCE.

A more certain prehistoric period has been theorized by historians as that of the state of Lhomon or Monyul,46 possibly a part of Tibet that was then beyond the pale of Buddhist teachings. Monyul is thought to have existed between 500 BCE and 600 CE. Some scholars believe that during the early historical period, the inhabitants were fierce mountain aborigines, the Monpa, who were of neither the Tibetan nor Mongol stock that later overran Northern Bhutan. The people of Monyul practiced the shamanistic Bon religion, which emphasized worship of nature and the existence of good and evil spirits. During the latter part of this
period, historical legends relate that the mighty king of Monyul invaded a Southern region known as the Duars, subduing the regions of modern Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar in India.

Prior to the ninth century CE, little is known about the political power, administration, religious beliefs, and socioeconomic pattern in Bhutan. The earliest history refers to the Indian kings of Kamarupa, particularly, King Sangaldip had ruled Bhutan until the middle of the seventh century when the kingdom collapsed. After the demise of the kingdom, Bhutan could be a conglomeration of small states with strong influence of Indian in the South, Tibetan in the West, and indigenous in East. Buddhism had played a strong role in the creation and consolidation of a theocratic state. However, who introduced Buddhism to Bhutan is surrounded by mystery. Hasrat claims that the earliest inhabitants of Bhutan had their own distinct religion and that Bonism, the pre-Buddhist folk religion of Tibet, had made moderately successful influx from Tibet into Bhutan’s Buddhism in the seventh century by Tibetan King Songtsen Gompo.

He pledged to build 108 temples throughout Tibet, two of which were constructed in Bhutan in Bumthang (Central Bhutan) and Paro Valley (Western Bhutan). Aris, however, questions the time of establishment of temples and mentions that several other temples built in the earliest times of Bhutan could indicate that other unknown and unnamed figures first brought Buddhism to Bhutan.

The coming of Guru Padma Sambhava, the legendary master from India or Nepal to cure the ailing King of Sindhu, who had ruled over Western Bhutan and parts of Tibet from Bumthang in Central Bhutan, is the landmark in the pre-feudal period. There is hearsay that the guru cured the ailing king and reaffirmed his faith in Buddhism, and spread the religion across the land. In this way, the Buddhism was established in Bhutan and the local religion incorporated into Buddhism.

In following centuries, there was an influx of people from Tibet into Bhutan in the form of invaders, migrants, monks, and lamas. The first known Tibetan settlements in Bhutan date back to the ninth century after defeating an Indian army in Bhutan. Not only this, many people left Tibet for Bhutan out of fear of religious persecution. In the middle of the ninth century, a Bongo Tibetan king, Lang Drama, forced Buddhist followers from Tibet. Again around the thirteenth century, a Mongol invasion of Tibet established the Sakyapas, a reformed school classed as a new translation tradition, as the temporal and spiritual rulers in Tibet. Thus, various sects competed with each other in Tibet and forced their
influence into Bhutan. History point specifically to several individual personalities who crossed into Bhutan and spread Buddhism. Most notably, Phajom Shingpo, a lama from Ralung (Tibet) introduced the Drukpa teachings in Bhutan in the early thirteenth century; through his four sons, he established the Drukpa sect in various districts in Western Bhutan. Another notable personality is Lama Drukpa Kuenley, who spread the Drukpa sect in Bhutan in the fifteenth century. By the sixteenth century, different descendants of Drukpa nobility established a hold, though somewhat tenuous and fragmented in Western Bhutan, such that in the West the evidence pointing to the existence of the ecclesiastical states governed either by Tibetan or local families is overwhelming. In the East, some elements of the secular class rule existed, but the religious rule was slowly gaining permanence.

The dawn and fall of all the sects of Lamaism in Tibet extended their missionary activities from their Tibetan strongholds to Bhutan before the establishment and consolidation of the Lamaist Church State (i.e., theocracy) in the seventeenth century. Thus, the phase of the medieval theocracy is very much relevant to the emergence of the Bhutanese polity. Both the law and political theory of ancient Bhutan point out to the petty kingship with its own unique concept as the pivotal political institution and administrative machinery of the country. Buddhist political philosophy and the impact of Tibetan monasticism have influenced the development of Bhutan’s political institution.

The phase of the early kings and monastic principalities provides us with the image of traditional society in which events, characters, and individuals come on the scene to play the predetermined roles. The political history is closely linked with its religious history. It is very strange to know that Lamaist missionaries were active in Bhutan in contrast to the Namgyal rule in Sikkim and Gelugpa rule in Tibet. Some came to Bhutan on pilgrimage, others in search of new patrons, and some to avoid the political turmoil brewing in Tibet. Thus, the unique polity of ancient Bhutan was explored, settled, crystallized, civilized, nurtured, and en-cultured by the quasi-charismatic and quasi-divine individuals like Sindhu King, Guru Padmashamvawa, Phajom Shigpo, and Drukpa Kuenley.

However, it was a very fluid situation, almost on the verge of Lamaist sectarian anarchy. Even though the ancient political and administrative history of Bhutan is wrapped in mist and mystery, and patronizing evidence is very flimsy, we can conclude that until the seventeenth century, no effective centralized authority or form of government existed in Bhutan. There were numerous independent principalities in Bhutan. From the fourteenth century to the seventeenth century,
the political history of Bhutan is the reflection of the conflicts between various elite families and between monastic institutions established by Drukpa Kagyupa sects. The political and socioeconomic circumstances, under which Bhutanese lived, interacted with, and managed natural resources, evolved since the eighth century. Sinha described that the system that prevailed until the beginning of the seventeenth century was clan based and tribal in nature.56

Unifier Regimes during the Pre-Wangchuk Monarchy Era (1594–1907)

The decisive personality and the protagonist of modern Bhutan was Thuchen Ngawang Namgyal, who was born in 1594 into the leading Drukpa family. Although Buddhism has occupied a predominant role in shaping the social, political, economic, and cultural evolution of the country, no one succeeded until the arrival in Bhutan of Thuchen Nagwang Namgyal57 (1594–1651), a militant, charismatic, visionary, and able administrator who fought numerous wars and unified the country under a single central administration in 1637, and named the country Land of dragon—“Druk Gyalkhab”—and its inhabitants Drukpa. The need for a strong religiopolitical leader was filled by him in Drukpa monastic institutions and among Drukpa elites. Recurrent warfare between the Bhutanese and Tibetans and subsequent organized resistance of both internal and external foes and rivals help him establish the political and religious authority.

By the end of the seventeenth century, the country emerged with a distinct national and cultural identity. Supported by other powerful Drukpa rulers in Bhutan, he consolidated the “Drukpa ecclesiastical states” in Western Bhutan. Dzongs,58 such as Simtokha (1630), Wangdiphodrang (1638), and Tashichhodzong (1641), were constructed to provide the Drukpa sect strong religiopolitical centers in Western and central Bhutan. Later on, he proclaimed himself as “Zhabdrung.”59 Bhutan grew through one major transition during this period. It took place when the hierarch of the Drukpa Kargyupa, beginning with Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, who came to Bhutan as a political refugee in 1616, founded a central government, imposed a uniform set of institutions in the country, and established its present borders. It would appear that in the Middle Ages, the spiritual power was in the ascendant in Bhutan, which was analogous to the middle age throughout the world. In the age of superstition in Bhutan, the church possessed power of the soul more mighty than armies. In other words, the spiritual power was superior to the temporal power in Bhutan. Thus, there was no wonder that in the Middle Ages, Bhutan perceived a cataclysm on the same prototype as in the Middle Ages in Europe.
A typical theocratic form of government was instituted, and he named it “Choe-Sid Nyi System,” or the dual system of governance, where the Je Khenpo was in charge of religious matters as the head of the Drukpa Kargyupa sect of Mahayana Buddhism in Bhutan, while the Desid was in charge of state affairs. The Desid was nominated by the Punakha Dzongpon, the Thimphu Dzongpon, the Wangdi Phodrang Dzongpon, the Zhung Droneyer, the Zhung Kalyeon, the Zhung Dongsapa, the Tongsa Penlop, the Paro Penlop, the Daga Penlop, and the Zhung Draktshang. The Je Khenpo, on the other hand, was appointed from amongst the Dorji Lopen, the Yangbi Lopen, the Drabi Lopen, the Tshenyi Lopen, and the Dratshang Umzey. The Dorji Lopen was usually considered the first choice for the post of the Je Khenpo, since he was usually the most learned among the group. Both these positions had a fixed tenure of three years, but it wasn’t uncommon for their tenures to be extended. However, this theocracy depended for its success on active support for the central government from the almost independent provincial magnates and was more in the nature of a “galactic polity” than a unitary state. The provincial courts formed “practically autonomous galaxies of authority replicating the structure and purpose of the central government and constantly threatening it to the point of internal collapse.”

After the official announcement of Zhabdrung’s demise, the regional Penlops and Dzongpons then reinstated the earlier system of local chieftains and again plunged the state into skirmishes. However, this time, the price was much bigger. Everybody tried to manipulate the system to become the Desid or to appoint their man to occupy the post. The infighting and intrigues in the country catapulted Jigme Namgyal, who changed the course of Bhutan’s history forever.

Traditional societies such as in Bhutan do not necessarily maintain distinction between society, polity, and religion. Bhutanese were tribal in social organization, Lamaist in faith, and medieval in their overall orientation. This was the society where religious faith was supreme; in fact, no aspect of life was untouched by the religious establishment. The highly organized and reasonably well-disciplined monastic system was the only centralizing force in Bhutan. David Field Rennie may be regarded as a best applicable source of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Bhutan. He has marvelously recapitulated the institution of Zhabdrung and his assistants, Druk Desid and Je Khenpo, in the following words:

In theory there is said to be an excellent system of Government in Bhutan. As the Government now exists, there is no doubt that it has two national heads, known to us and to the neighboring hill—tribes under the Hindoostanee names of the Dharma and the Deb Raja, though called by other names, as I am given to understand, by the Bhutanese themselves. The former is the spiritual head, the latter, and the
The Zhabdrung decided to combine monastic, strategic, and administrative functions of his newly established small state to be centered round the institution of the dzongs. He could not materialize his vision nor could complete his expansionist policy. He died at the age of fifty-seven years in 1651. His death was concealed for more than fifty years. Aris states: “The action may not have been as surprising as it at first seems; the fifth Dalai Lama also instructed his close attendants to keep his death a secret in order to ensure his incarnation would not face trouble from Mongols.” The death of Zhabdrung was revealed only during the reign of [seventh] Druk Desi. However, the country was already engulfed by intermittent civil war, which continued for centuries. The institution of Zhabdrung lasted for almost 250 years (1651–1907) in which fifty-five Druk Desids ruled Bhutan with an average of 4.62 years. Thus, like any other political system whether Asiatic or occidental, it possessed both the merits and demerits.

Despite the flaws in the system, it provided political and religious institutions, customary laws, and rules of social conduct, civil, financial, and judicial administration. Bhutan’s medieval civilization and cultural heritage are enshrined in it. The dzong system, laws codified by him, Je Khenpo, and the title of Penlop exist in present-day Bhutan. The concept of Dharma Raja and its institutions has so much influence in the entire life of nation that politics and administration of state could not be complete without its allusion. Even though it has lost its glory of heyday, it still wields influence on the political, religious, and socioeconomic lives of Bhutanese people. It was born as a “foaming child” of the age and has totally eclipsed but leaves a heritage and succession church, which is geared to the requirement of modern Bhutan. Zhabdrung is the source of pride and concern to Bhutanese as he is the founder of Bhutan and legitimate ruler. Thus, from petty kingship before 1616, Zhabdrung unified the country and provided a revolutionary and formative political and administrative structure. However, it was usurped by powerful Trongsa Penlop, the great-great-grandfather of the present king and transformed it into hereditary monarchy.

Although the theocracy achieved to bring about a real measure of cultural and political unity, it was really left to the second major transition “to usher in
political unity and national purpose.” This came about after the apparent 
decision to establish a hereditary monarchy in 1907 as delineated below.

**Monarchy-Bureaucratic–Authoritarian Regime (1907–1952)**

The term authoritarianism entails that, on balance, the exercise of power is 
illiberal and based on the authority of those who hold the center either formally 
or obscurely, and to those whom they delegate or defer. That authority is often 
legitimated by democratic, authoritative, and mythic claims to universal 
representation, or some combination of all, the core of the state apparatus as “a 
distinct ensemble of institutions and organizations, whose socially accepted 
function is to define and enforce collectively binding decisions on a given 
population in the name of their “common interest or general will.”

As conferred above, until the twentieth century, Bhutan was ruled jointly by a 
reincarnate lama and a secular administrator. By the second half of the 
eighteenth century, the country witnessed the resurgence of political instability 
due to internal conflict between the feudal lords of its various provinces and 
districts. The unity of the country was affected by internal dissent. External 
threats in the latter half of the nineteenth century added a new dimension to the 
political quandary. It was against this backdrop that the need for strong national 
leadership emerged.

When the institution of hereditary monarchy was receding globally, a tiny 
Himalayan kingdom saw the birth of new system based on one-man rule. Both 
the internal and external factors proved favorable to usurp the power of secular 
and temporal head by the then Trongsa Penlop. Internally, 1903 proved to be a 
dividing line in Bhutanese history. In 1903, both the Zhabdrung and Druk Desid 
Yanglob Sangye Dorji (1883–1903) died. As a result, both the spiritual and 
temporal authorities were vested in Chhole Trulku Yishi Ngodup, the then Je 
Khenpo of Bhutan. He proved to be a very feeble Desid and paved the way to 
take over both the temporal and spiritual power by Ugen Wangchuk. Moreover, 
unlike his predecessors, he was not apt for the then demanding diplomacy 
involved in Indo-Tibetan relations in which Bhutan has a serious stake. 
Externally, the role of British India was very significant in the establishment of 
the hereditary monarchy in Bhutan. Bhutan was brought into the framework of 
“British Diplomacy” almost at par with other Indian states. Their main intent 
was to search for and locate the center of power and bring into their ambit to 
augment and build upon their own interests. The policy of locating the seat of 
power and winning it over helped the British Government to bring Bhutan to
their fold and paved the way for establishment of a hereditary monarchy. Even Singh agrees with the comparable hypothesis, when he states, “It would appear that the aforesaid policy of state which the British enforced throughout the establishment of their rule in Asia, was applied with full in case of Bhutan as well. In actual practice, it yielded rich dividends whenever it was applied.”

In view of above internal situation and to enforce “British Diplomacy,” John Claude White, the then political agent to Bhutan, functioning to enforce this well-defined astute policy, concluded that among all petty and powerful potentates that existed in Bhutan, the Trongsa Penlop, Ugen Wangchuk, was the most powerful element to augment the British interest. Ugen Wangchuk favorably impressed White during his visit to Bhutan in 1905 and quelled any fears the British might have had about Trongsa Penlop. He proved to be a better alliance partner than the Paro Penlop, who was certainly not siding with the British. This opinion was recorded by Charles Bell, the political officer in the early 1900s in the annual report that the political officer submits: “The Paro Penlop was as hostile to Britain as, when Bell had first encountered him in 1904 when making the Amochu road survey. He is the leading chief in Bhutan and his revenue is greater than that of any of the others. . . . The Paro Penlop required watching.”

The British interest in Bhutan can be translucent from the letter from political officer in Sikkim to Government of India. “He is at present little more than the overload of a confederation of Chiefs, . . . it is of utmost importance for the maintenance of peace on North East (N.E.) frontier that Bhutan should continue to remain united and peaceful . . . the Maharaja can gradually increase his power until he is in a position to deal with any hostile rising . . . of Chief, given sufficient outside inducement in money or promise, (who) . . . would throw off the control of the Maharaja.”

The economic consideration played a more significant role in shaping Anglo-Bhutanese relationship than any other factors. Thus, the British took the opportunity in their hands and dispatched the resident political officer in Sikkim, John Claude White, with the presents on the eve of the installation of Trongsa Penlop, Ugen Wangchuk, as the hereditary ruler of Bhutan in 1907.

Political stability was restored with the enthronement of King Ugyen Wangchuck as the first hereditary monarch of the kingdom in 1907. The first problem the king faced was the one usually subsumed under the “rubric legitimating.” He adopted all the necessary steps to legitimize the new institution in the eyes of both the elites and the people. He appropriated some of the titles and symbolism previously associated with Zhabdrung to maintain the continuity
in the outer manifestations of the authority system. He also managed to gain the required external political endorsement of British India, which was vital to provide stability. He managed to persuade civil and religious elite to sign a document, indicating acceptance of himself as Druk Gyalpo and recognizing the Wangchuk family as the hereditary dynasty of Bhutan. Thus, he concentrated on efforts to assert an effective central authority over a disparate collection of monastic and regional elites. Another major problem the king encountered was that of establishment of a more centralized system of government over the opposition of an elite that had long been conditioned by an environment that permitted almost total decentralization of national institutions. The sincerity of allegiance to the Wangchuk was certainly open to questions. Former Paro Penlop, Dawa Paljor, was the main opposition and never accepted his authority until his death in 1918. Moreover, the Byaker from Bumthang was involved in a conspiracy against the life of Druk Gyalpo. He tried to neutralize this potential source of opposition by indulging them in certain respects in state affairs. He also adopted the subtle policy of undermining their support base. The supporters of ex–Paro Penlop were allowed to retain their office until his death in 1918. The powerful noble family of Byaker was treated softly, although the head of the family was exiled to a remote corner of Bhutan. This policy has curtailed the capacity of the powerful feudal family to indulge in state affairs and political activity.

The other potential source of conflict was that of Drukpa monastic establishment. King Ugen happened to be a statist regime with a commitment to a strong powerful centralized state, in which agents of state institutions wield power with no popular accountability. The establishment of hereditary monarchy put an end to the influence of the clergy and the priest by destroying the internal theory of separation of powers between the spiritual and temporal heads of Bhutan. The Chief Abbot since 1907 has been relegated to the position of the guardian of the state rituals providing legitimacy to the king’s accession to power. Besides his duties as the head of the Drukpa Church, he was in charge of monk body, a network of monasteries, and as a final interpreter of the traditional laws, lore, customs, and practices.

The unique system of Zhabdrung, which was highly decentralized, was modified and replaced both structurally and operationally. The change of regime in 1907 had passed almost unnoticed for average Bhutanese peasants. They were no longer called upon to perform the widely detested militia duties as frequently as had been the case earlier, when civil strife had been a common feature of the
highly decentralized, conflict-ridden Zhabdrung system. Rose states: “The Bhutanese ruling dynasty in 1907 still represented the conservative elements of that society and was highly reluctant to enter into any direct contact with the external powers and, as such, as the monarch, seemed more interested in impressing the British as a trusted ally rather than presiding over social transformation in Bhutan.”

One commonly cited myth about the monarchy is that it was “unanimously elected” by all the Bhutanese stakeholders, including people, clergy, state councilors, the chillas, or governors. Many scholars and authors appear to support the notion of “unanimously elected.” The Hindu Daily quotes: “The institution of Monarchy in Bhutan is unique. It was the people, represented by the clergy, the state councillors, the chillas or govenoers of the districts and the representatives of the people, who unanimously elected Trongsa Penlop, Ugen Wangchuk as the first hereditary king of Bhutan.” However, it is very disbelieving that the monarchy was instituted by the consensus of all as known by the milieu of bloody history of the struggle for political dominance between Penlops, Deb Rajas, and reincarnating Zhabdruings. Rose seems to agree with the view that there are no specific cases that support the hypothesis that the institution of monarchy was established by consensus of all people. Dawa Paljor, the powerful Paro Penlop, who sided with China, seem to have never accepted the monarchical system in Bhutan until his death in 1918. Rahul states: “For some years, a few chiefs owing allegiance to the then Paro Penlop, Dawa Paljor—who was Ugen Wangchuk’s erstwhile adversary—remained practically independent.”

Thus, from the theocratic ideology of the rule of the “Cho,” there was a shift to ultimate loyalty and subservience to the dynastic sovereigns. The significant state functionaries were invariably royal family members or Wangchuk allies, unlike the past incarnate lamas. Unlike the past logical orientation toward the Lamaist theocracy of Tibet for support, the new regime aligned itself with the British Indian Empire. The nobility and monk hierarchy are above all the laws. Thus, Ugen Wangchuk established a dynastic rule and administration backed by the “theocratic ideology.” The central government was strictly supervised and controlled by the ruling monarch and the capacity of the district officers, the monastic order, or the nobility to influence decision, though the consultative institution that had existed prior to 1907 was greatly diminished. The first king established the royal capital at Bumthang. This contributed significantly to the centralizing process since it strengthened the king’s control over his main
support base. The first king expired in 1926. He was succeeded by his son Jigme Wangchuck.

The second King, Jigme Wangchuck (1926–1952), ushered in a new era and unified the country under a central authority. It also set in motion a steady process of engagement with the outside world. The country also took its first steps toward modernization by sponsoring a program of education and training of Bhutanese abroad. During the reign of second king, it was a regular procedure to transfer most district officers periodically, thus depriving them the opportunity to build up the local support base that had previously guaranteed them a broad degree of authority from central control. Rahul observes: “the second king Jigme Wangchuk also appointed his own relatives to the post of responsibility as he could not depend upon their loyalty. He kept, as a matter of policy, a rigid control over his Dzongpons. Most of the Dzongpons in the central Bhutan are his appointees and kinsmen.”

Administration was feudal, anachronistic, and in a chaotic state. The king appointed, dismissed, and punished the civil servants, as they were apt to think. Thus, the terms of appointment, emoluments, and responsibility and accountability of the officials were not clearly defined. This centralization of political authority, however, was not accompanied by a substantial expansion of the central administrative structure. Although more organized than the previous system, the deployment of power is arbitrary by virtue of its relative accountability to the people. The political participation was totally suppressed, and the king and royal elites reserved an authority to determine the rights and freedoms everyone else enjoys while being largely free from institutional constraints themselves.

The first two kings were successful in creating a highly centralized system in which the royal power came as close to “absolutism” as is possible in a traditional society with a feudal heritage. The regional elites, who had held certain district offices almost as if by right, were now eased out. Virtually all the Dzongpons thereafter were either members of the royal family or servants of the palace who are personally selected by the king. During the reign of the first two kings, the central secretariat was small enough to be run from a single room in the royal palace at Bumthang. The Wangchuk made state as exclusive family property and saw to it that the aristocracy, a vital constituent of the feudal system, did not emerge. This was secured through extensive “practice of endogamy” within the royal family. The total system revolved around a court and personal rule rather than “shift from court to government” and from “personal rule to a system” that sustain itself. It was typical of the dynastic rule
in which high-handedness, suppression, personal allegiance, extreme isolation, and technological primitivism were the very terms to qualify the Bhutanese system. The rulers were not in haste to change. No opposition and aristocracy developed, unlike their Sikkimese and Nepalese counterparts, as they were nipped at the buds. The political system depended upon the unqualified submission of the subjects to the traditional medieval methods of regimentation, exploitation, and oppression. Thus, the rulers and the ruled were poles apart. Rose recapitulates the period of first two kings and their rule in following words: “With the exception of the noble role created for the Dorji family, the establishment of an hereditary monarchical system does not appear to have resulted in fundamental structural changes in the Bhutan administration during the reign of the first Wangchuk rulers. As Druk Gyalpos, the Wangchuk’s introduced a strong centralization trend and carefully moved to concentrate full powers in their own hands.” For much of the period from 1907 to 1952, the king held absolute power, supported and advised by small influential royal family members and traditional political elites. There was no distinction between society, polity, and religion.

**Monarchy-Liberal–Conservative Regime (1952–2006)**

The term liberal–conservative is used here to define a regime that is characterized by a pattern of liberal political institutions, but which remains in conservative and authoritative in its political and social outlook and its use of relevant social institutions: the monarchy and cultural forms that were held to advance the liberal principle. Some important political reforms have taken place since this second transition.

The Jigme Dorji Wangchuk (1952–1972) became the third king in 1952 on the demise of second king. This period was the product of significant changes in South Asia. Finding himself and the state secluded and alone in the midst of the fast-changing political events in the neighboring countries of China and India, the king felt the need for modernization of the country through gradual economic, social, and political development, and carved out a place for itself in the comity of nations. This clearly indicates that Bhutan was in a medieval period. Karma observes: “The period that seems medieval in character extends right up to the end of 1950s because there were strong features of medieval period and feudalism till the late 1960s.” According to him, the transition from a traditional order and the forces of change can be explored in the evolution of Bhutan from non-market to market organization, from customary self-
subsistence economy to planned trading economy, from theocratic and absolute regime to a modern government, and from state whose ideology was to support the religious order to one with commitment for socioeconomic development of the country. The only advantage during the period for Bhutan was its geopolitical and geostrategic importance as it is sandwiched between two Asian giants: India and China.

Thus, precisely up to 1952, the public policy was simple, straightforward, and internally consistent. The primary objective was political centralization, maintenance of the social and economic status quo, and isolation of country from potentially disruptive extraneous influences. The system was not suitable to handle challenges generated by internal and external forces. Thus, for economic, political, and social progress, reforms became imperative in Bhutan. The third king rationalized that, “limited reforms introduced over an extended period under non-crisis conditions were preferable to radical change that would tear apart the social and political fabric of Bhutan’s traditional system and lead perhaps to national disintegration.” Rustomji vividly highlighted Bhutan’s apprehension of modernization and change:

My impression is that while Bhutan authorities would welcome aid for the implementation of their development projects, they are apprehensive of the implication and are reluctant to embark on any step that might have the effect of rendering them dependent on or under a sense of obligation to any external power. It is not merely a suspicion of Indian or foreigner . . . what Bhutanese fear, most of us is the disruption of their way of life and their religious and social values that might result from over rapid modernization and foreign contacts.

The third king instituted far-reaching political, social, and economic reforms. He characterized the period, where some efforts were made in Bhutan to reshape its medieval political system along somewhat modern lines. Also beginning in the early 1960s, the king embarked on a program to reform the country’s economy and its quasi-feudal social system. It was limited in scope at the beginning, but by the 1960s, it had become comprehensive to affect all aspects of life of Bhutanese.” New roads and hospitals were built, and a system of secular schools was established as an alternative to education in Buddhist monasteries. The transformation of the social system began with the abolition of slavery, the restriction of polyandry and polygamy, and a slight liberalization of royal rule. Bhutan’s government institutions were also restructured, though the king retained firm control over the country’s political life.

Political instability occasionally surfaced. The third king witnessed protests from Southern districts for democratic rights and changes, obviously influenced
by the changes in India. Following the dissents, he established the National Assembly (Tshogdu Chhenpo) in 1953 with 152 members. The prime minister was murdered in 1964, and in 1965, an unsuccessful assassination attempt was made on the king himself. In 1965, the king also established the Royal Advisory Council (Lodey Tshogdey). The third king separated the judiciary from the executive by establishing a High Court. In 1968, the first Council of Ministers or Cabinet (Lhengye Zhungshog) was created consisting of the ministers and member of the Royal Advisory Council. In his speech to the National Assembly in 1968, the king expressed his desire to form a government combining the monarchical and democratic systems to ensure the stability and solidarity of the country. He, therefore, proposed that the National Assembly should be empowered to pass a no-confidence motion against any king who is found unfit to rule the country. After much debate and reluctance, the National Assembly adopted this issue in its sixty-ninth session, where it was prescribed that a two-thirds majority of the Assembly membership had to register confidence in king every three years for his continuation. In the absence of an opposition in the system of Bhutanese parliament, the debates echoed with no criticism and concluded with the resolution based on the final say from the throne. Bhutan officially ended its political isolation by joining the United Nations in 1971, ensuring the kingdom a place in the international community.

The king initiated reforms in the backdrop of the political problem in Southern Bhutan in the 1950s, demanding human rights and democracy, and the assassination of the only prime minister in a political crisis in 1964. These reforms came more as a measure to neutralize and impede the rise of traditionalists and feudal elites and to accommodate the aspirations of the Southern Bhutanese. Hutt observes that: “Developments both internally and externally likely prompted these reforms, particularly a growing Nepali political activism within the region and the formation of a political party—the Bhutan State Congress by members of the Nepali Bhutanese community to promote political reforms.”

A popular Nepalese movement had already toppled the hereditary regime in Nepal in 1951, and the third king had reason to fear for his own future. However, unlike later efforts to counter Nepali Bhutanese political movements with exclusionary tactics, the government welcomed the vast majority of the Nepali Bhutanese residents into the emerging Bhutanese polity through the Nationality Act of 1958.

Any observer of the Bhutanese landscape during the reign of the third king can infer that there is an obvious shift from “Court to Government “and from the
“personal rule to a system.” Sinha observes:

As a step to introduce some elements of participative politics in the feudal absolutism, this royal decision caused consternation and apprehension in the minds of the elites. However, the king appeared to be innovative to traditionalize the growing demand from the subjects for a role in the political process, possibly the king could have felt the likelihood of a bigger danger to the dynastic rule from the feudal elite than that of the people’s representative. As a check between the administrative elite and the rural representative, he could rope in the shock absorbing monastic representatives.¹⁰²

In the period from 1953 to 1972, the general movement had been toward a limited constitutional monarchy in which the throne retained its status as a fulcrum of the political system but shared power and authority with several other political and administrative institutions.¹⁰³ However, the process of change was new and largely untested that several alternative paths, including a return to absolute monarchy, were still open to present political system.¹⁰⁴

On the passing away of third king in 1972, the young prince Jigme Singye Wangchuk (1972–2006) succeeded his father as fourth hereditary monarch of Bhutan. In October 1973, the “vote of confidence” on the king was waived off and the election of ministers was done away with by King Jigme. The result of all these contributed to the re-establishment of the “royal absolutism” in Bhutan. However, in the 1980s, King Jigme pursued the footsteps of his father and introduced further reforms. King Jigme initiated administrative decentralization in 1981 by the establishment of twenty District Development Committees and the introduction of 202 Block Development Committees in 1991.¹⁰⁵ In 1998, King Jigme’s reform brought structural changes as well as changes concerning procedures and responsibilities. The most significant change has been the devolution of executive powers of governance away from the king, who is not the head of government any longer, but still the head of state. Also a part of this reform was again the restoration of the vote of confidence in the king, which can lead to the king’s abdication in favor of his hereditary successor, if the National Assembly should vote against him by a two-thirds majority.¹⁰⁶

Although the king continued to wield significant power, he shared some power with the rubber stamp Council of Ministers. In addition, at the behest of the king, efforts were directed toward establishing a written constitution of Bhutan. He commissioned a thirty-nine-member Constitution Drafting Committee. The constitution had thirty-five articles covering a wide spectrum of political, social, and security issues, including duties and responsibilities of Bhutanese citizens. The constitution provides for elections to a small upper house, National Council (twenty elected and five appointed by the king) and a forty-seven-seat lower
house, the National Assembly. The royal initiated draft constitution was released on March 26, 2005, by the king. The king along with the then crown prince toured Bhutan to inform the people about the constitution. However, unfortunately, there were never any public discussions. In the same year, the king also informed the nation that the draft constitution would be adopted in 2008.

King Jigme Singye Wangechuck abdicated in favor of his son Jigme Khesar Namgyel in December 2006, contravening his own authored constitutional provision, where the king will have to resign at the age of sixty-five. His premature resignation at fifty-one years brought out several plausible myths and answers. The real motive behind the abdication was to circumvent the past palace-centered conflicts and political conspiracies, which can be a threat to the throne, as internally Bhutan was going through series of political instability with its nucleus at the royal palace and Wangchuk family and Yab Ugen family. The Wangchuk dynasty had rehearsed through strings of political conspiracies within the family circle and power centers since its establishment in 1907. Since the royal court is known for such political conspiracies, King Jigme (K4) was aware that it would resurface when his son succeeded after his death. This is particularly so as he has ten children from four wives (all sisters). His unpopular, family-centric policies had also desecrated his image. Moreover, there was an opposition movement in exile demanding for change in the political system. Some radical groups were demanding a republican system or Zhabdrung system without monarchy. Handing over the reign to a new monarch would save the throne as well as reinstate the king’s image and also enable him to rule from behind the curtain as the crown prince had at least a clean image without any apparent incumbency baggage. Also his abdication absolved him of crime of ethnic cleansing of one-sixth of the population as opposition based in exile at that time was initiating the move to take the issue to the International Court of Justice to incriminate King Jigme (K4) for his crime against humanity.

Moreover, King Jigme’s (K4) initiatives to change from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy had emerged not from an act of altruism as claimed by many but from a line of thought driven by real politick. It was obviously based on a clear assessment of potential trajectories for the monarchy’s viability. Also, several trends and phenomena showed a rather pessimistic future for an absolute monarchy in the country. Being surrounded by semi-communist (China) and democratic (India) political systems, facing internally the emergence of an opposition (1990s), the integration of the kingdom of Sikkim into the Indian
Union in 1975, as well as a decline of its image on the international stage because of the expulsion of around one hundred thousand Bhutanese of Nepali origin, and the emergence of militant opposition like the Bhutan Tiger Force or the Bhutan Maoist Party, the king had to act in order to maintain at least a minimum of monarchical elements in Bhutan’s future political system in order to guarantee the survival of the Wangchuck dynasty. Considering all these perilous situations, King Jigme (K4) decided unalteringly that it would be for the greater good of his dynasty to leave the throne to his son, so that the transition would take place very smoothly. Thus, it was not a virtuous gesticulation and benign move that the GNH King Jigme (K4) exhibited by abdicating the throne as highlighted by frenzied national, regional, and Western media, hitchhiker tourists, academics, and scholars; rather, he left it reluctantly, and he wished to be king for many more years to extend his grip in the country.

In Bhutanese discourse, the constitution is imagined as a gift, in the argument that it is not claimed by the people, but given to them by their benevolent monarch. The “Royal Constitution as a gift to Bhutanese people from the king” is preposterous. It has been introduced to consolidate the power of the throne rather than sharing with people. The much hyped myth of constitution as gift by king is beautifully recapitulated by Winne in following words:

The idea of the constitution as a gift, however, makes it a rather unusual one. It is not one that is presumably intended by the giver, the King, who wants the citizens to take responsibility for the process, nor do the receivers, the “people,” whose imaginary is shaped by the paternalistic narrative of the King, necessarily want it. Rather than representing an absolute truth, the notion of the gift serves the purpose of reproducing a traditionalized image of authority. Translated into a local reality, the drama therefore serves to alter the political landscape on its surface, but not in any depth. While the system is reformed, the worldview of the Drukpa establishment retains its dominant position, upheld by the continuation of the Wangchuck dynasty. As such, the debates came to be a scene for legitimizing the change, whilst reproducing authoritarian discourses and relations of authority.

Borrowing Bourdieu’s eloquent formulation, gift giving enables domination to be established and maintained through strategies, which are softened and disguised and which conceal domination beneath the veil of an enchanted relation. It enables those who benefit most from the system to convince those who benefit least from grasping the basis of their own deprivation. I argue that the process of “gifting the constitution” to the Bhutanese people therefore appears to serve highly contemporary strategies of power. It can, arguably, best be understood from Bourdieu’s perspective as a process of consolidating the symbolic domination of the governing elite over the citizens. In contrast to overt coercion, it has been argued that symbolic domination is a gentle and invisible
process, because of the obligation of trust and personal loyalty implied in the process of giving such a selfless and benevolent gift. As such, the “gift” discourse seems more suited to promote the interests of those who are already in privileged positions of power, rather than including those who are marginalized. The ones to gain the least from the process are the innocent Bhutanese citizens, who are taciturn spectators in a process that lies far beyond their framework of knowledge.

The distinguished historian Ernest Renan writes that “Forgetting is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation.”\(^\text{114}\) Meanwhile, the popular campaigns for democracy, human rights, and citizenship rights that took place only a decade before the reforms seem to have been forgotten, along with the voices of the Bhutanese living in exile. Instead, the narrative of the constitution as a gift seems to serve an implicit strategy of delinking the reforms from those events. The reforms mentioned above must also be seen as a preemptive defensive strategy to thwart the Southern and Eastern problem, where people have demanded basic human rights and democracy.\(^\text{115}\) Thus, the reign of King Jigme (K4) (1972–2006) was dominated by vested traditional and conservative interests of the palace coterie, thrusting Bhutan into political regression. King Jigme (K4) decided to introduce “semi-authoritarian democracy” in late 1990s, when he realized that under the leadership of Rongthong Kunley Dorje, the Sharchop community from the East had joined the democratic struggle, which was until then confined among the Lhotsampa population in Southern Bhutan. Thus, the king took defensive measures to preempt any damage to the institution of monarchy and dilute the power of the throne by introducing cosmetic changes.\(^\text{116}\) The ones who gained the most were the members of the royal family and conservative elites. They have, to a high degree, managed to divert attention from Bhutan’s image during the 1990s of a country torn by ethnic conflict and dissent over citizen rights. Instead, they succeeded in painting an image of the country as a lost “Shangri-la” that promotes a policy of happiness. The narrative of the benevolent king who gives the constitution as a gift to his people has served this strategy well. As one of its rewards, it has gained recognition of Bhutan as a full-fledged sovereign state in the shape of a document that is gifted to Bhutan on the eve of its constitutional monarchy—and this is a gift that is, indeed, both intended and wanted.\(^\text{117}\)

Seeing it from the outside, the Bhutanese process is testimony to how the current tendency to romanticize traditional, oriental, and nationalist discourses facilitates the maintenance of forms of authority that are essentially authoritarian
in nature. This orientalist view has guided the governing elite on a path that is
barely compatible with liberal ideas of freedom and equal worth, and which
serves to refer to the citizens to the role of supplicants. This, I argue, is no
coincidence, but rather an effect of the essentialist view of state formation.
Bhutan is no exception to a situation described by Samuel Huntington: “The
monarchical system is always in complex situation created by pro-status
traditional elites and pro-change modernizing elite, which lack western European
political background.”


As conversed above, by the turn of the twenty-first century, Bhutan had moved
to embrace semi-authoritarian democracy doubles to eliminate vestiges of its
historical isolation as well as to remove any threat to throne and traditional
power base. As argued by Calhoun, “where nationalist rhetoric stresses oneness
at the expense of a notion of a differentiated public, it becomes repressive not
just of minorities, but of all citizens.” Accelerating this initiative was the
abdication of King Jigme (K4) in 2006 and the transfer of the throne to his son.
In June 2007, the ban on political parties was lifted on paper to allow for their
formation. No parties based on race, religion, or ethnicity was allowed to
contest. Subsequently, only three parties registered, of which one was rejected.
Bhutan’s Election Commission denied registration to a third party, the Bhutan
People’s United Party, allegedly because that its candidates did not possess the
necessary competence, experience, or qualifications. That left only two
parties. The formation of another party was very unlikely by then as polls were
nearing. The reason is obvious as they wanted to eliminate the real opposition
party. Thus, only two parties who have a close alliance with the king contested
the first election: the People’s Democratic Party, headed by an maternal uncle of
the present king, and the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa, headed by a former two-time
chairperson of the Council of Ministers, a royal family relative and close
confidant of King Jigme (K4) and one of the main architects of ethnic cleansing
of Lhotsampas and suppressor of democratic and human rights movements of
Southern and Eastern Bhutan. Today, Jigme Thinley was hard-pressed out
from the politically relevant circle of both King Jigme and India due to his
alleged tilt toward China when he was a prime minister from 2008 to 2013.

In December 2007, the first elections to the upper chamber of the parliament
took place, though not on a party basis. The voter turnout was low and in several
districts, elections had to be postponed, as there were no candidates. The
National Assembly elections were held on March 24, 2008, and contested by two parties: the People’s Democratic Party and Druk Phuensum Tshogpa. The election results suggest that there had been no real competition. The signing of the country’s first written royal constitution was done on July 18, 2008, with which Bhutan had been transformed into a constitutional monarchy in paper.

The King Khesar (K5) was enthroned amidst political struggle for democracy and advocacy for refugee repatriation, and he has become custodian of the palace-gifted constitution. King Khesar (K5) acceded to the throne on December 14, 2006, and was crowned on November 6, 2008, as the fifth King of Bhutan and head of state, which rests on three important assumptions: being sacred, popular, and democratic. This deification ritual is performed as major gala for the entire country. The king inherited the dynasty legacy and popular coalitions associated with the monarchical system run by his father. He also adopted an authoritarian rule to flourish in a post–Cold War era in which even hard-nosed dictators must pay lip service to Western democracy. The second elections were held on May 31 (Primary Round) and July 13, 2013 (Final Round), and the People’s Democratic Party won thirty-two out of forty-seven seats in the National Assembly. The Druk Phuensum Tshogpa won fifteen seats in the National Assembly. Tshering Tobgay of the People’s Democratic Party was appointed as prime minister on July 30, 2013.

Conclusion

The clash of regime framers as conferred above laid the basis for the current paradox in Bhutan. In the battle between modes of order, each force competed with the other and attempted to restrain the other, ultimately resorting to authoritarian methods. Each force has failed to become institutionalized, leaving strategic royal elites to play games of absolute advantage, further enforcing the authoritarian impulse. Each force necessarily articulates to existing state institutions or supportive elements therein, whose substance is neither liberal nor democratic.

MAPPING BHUTAN’S ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE

Political economy of a country is pivotal to its economic dynamics as well as its social system. While politics and the process of politicking do not necessarily give rise to the economic and social structure of a people, the institutional framework, process, and outcome of this exercise do influence the course and
outcome of achievable socioeconomic status of the nation and its people. The theoretical work on the political economy provides ample empirical evidence and theories on the prerequisites for democratization, which advocate economic conditions as the prevailing factor. Most of the literature on the determinants of political regime type and regime change focused on broad structural factors that were thought to be conducive to either authoritarianism or democracy. The most widely studied factors of this genus were a series of socioeconomic conditions linked to economic development or modernization. According to “modernization theory,” low levels of these factors are conducive to authoritarianism and higher levels are conducive to democracy. Because these factors are closely related to the level of economic development, countries undergo a gradual, inexorable transition from authoritarianism to democracy as their economies develop, according to many authors. Recent work focuses on the political economy of development models and how economic factors, such as income level, output growth, and natural resource abundance, affect the type of political organization, democracy or autocracy, and consequently economic development. Therefore, identifying and quantifying how economic and social conditions affect the likelihood of permanent democratic transitions is the key to understanding the economic consequences of each polity type, and Bhutan is not an exception to this cliché.

Prior to the 1950s, the evolution of resource management institutions in Bhutan was highly influenced by the evolving religiopolitico regimes. The institution of the hereditary monarchy in 1907 provided a strong centralized system. The rulers up to 1952 represent the conservative elements of the society and reluctance to bring socioeconomic transformation. The third and fourth kings took the initiative to break the isolation and bring basic economic reforms to the country. The wheel of modernization unfolded by previous kings is also embraced by the present king for gradual economic development.

In order to synchronize the economic dimension of development, this section is tailored to sketch briefly the economic structure, development strategy and plans, economic indicators, and GDP growth rates, which are generally accepted as measures of quality of life and intend to ameliorate the living conditions of people.

**Brief Recapitulation of the Economic Landscape before the Wangchuk Monarchy (1594–1907)**
The different levels of government and officials—Zhabdrung, Desid, Je Khenpo, Penlops, and Dzongpons—derived the revenue in kind and cash from the following sources: land tax, revenue from Duar areas in Southern Bhutan, trade surplus from Indo-Bhutan and Tibeto-Bhutan trade, and subsidy paid to Bhutan by the British Government of India from the mid-nineteenth century and thereafter through treaty agreements.

There was neither system nor method of financial management in Bhutan during the Zhabdrung period. The economy of Bhutan at this time was essentially agricultural, often on a subsistence basis, with small-scale trading of surpluses between neighbors. Taxes were largely payable in goods, crop sharing, and labor. The taxes collected were stored in the dzongs; in times of need, surplus grain could probably be bought from the dzongs, using coins or in exchange for other goods. Any increase in transit trade may have benefited the local people, who would have provided transport in exchange for cash or a share of the goods being transported. It would have also presented the Bhutanese with opportunities to sell surplus local rice or other agricultural produce to Tibet, and hence retain some of the silver that was flowing Northwards. When there was surplus silver in the economy, taxes could be collected in coin, but not otherwise. When the bulk transit trade between India and Tibet did not pass through Bhutan, the export to Tibet of rice and other surplus agricultural produce exceeded in value the import of wool, gold, silks, and salt, resulting in a net flow of silver into Bhutan from the North.

Glimpse of the Economic Setting from 1907 to 1952

The Bhutanese economy was a pastoral, non-monetized barter economy with no technological base, so there was hardly any surplus generated in the economy. No budget was ever framed during the reign of the first two kings. Thus, financial administration, which includes the budget, payment procedure, accounting and reporting, and auditing, did not evolve in Bhutan during this period. The major problem in the process of development was lack of funds. The process of fund-raising, however, would have generated what one could aptly describe as self-supporting, capitalist development. Claude White writes: “The sale of timber, mining concession and grants of tea land would be means of bringing in considerable revenue and they decided to move the Government of (British) India for that matter.”129 The second king wrote in 1936: “In order to benefits my subjects by removing barriers and to create a stronger and more vigorous nation; fund was needed and the king realized that the national budget
was limited by the lack of direct monetary taxation and that lack of finance, together with the innate conservatism of the people made reform impossible and get there was in urgent need for good internal communication, a system of education, medical aid and a defense force.”

Internally, in each district there was a revenue officer Nyerchen, whose primary responsibility was to collect the rent in kind from cultivators on specified land. Most of the funds were then paid over to various members of royal family or to religious institutions that held rights to those lands. The only significant revenue of that time was the annual subsidy provided by the British India Government as per the Treaty of 1910, signed during the reign of the first king, and the Indo-Bhutan Treaty of 1949, signed and ratified during the reign of the second king. The British objective of providing assistance was to discourage Bhutan from aligning with China. Both Charles Bell and Claude White, the then political agent to Bhutan, urged their government for an increased subsidy and assistance toward the development of natural resources, the failure to take such steps would encourage turning toward the Chinese. The revenue of Bhutan, its accounting, payment procedures, and its dependence on British India was vividly depicted by the political officer in Sikkim, who wrote a letter to the Secretary, Foreign and Political Department on April 12, 1931: “The western Bhutan did not contribute anything to the Maharaja in term of taxes. Out of the revenue, it collected in kinds and spent them in maintenance of the monk bodies. . . . The cash subsidy and the liquor compensation of Rs. 2,000,000 was distributed among the monasteries and regional chief to ensure loyalty to the Maharaja. . . . If Bhutan is to advance on a modern lines and is not to be allowed to disintegrate, she should have increased financial support. . . . It is necessary to stress the danger to the Northeast frontier of India, if Bhutan collapses as an entity.” J. L. R. Wier, the then political officer of Sikkim, provides a telling depiction of the revenue system in Bhutan in 1930s: “Of the Rs. 2,000,000 received from the Government of India, Rs. 79,000 was paid to various monasteries, Rs. 24,000 to the court officials, Rs. 40,000 to the maintenance of his household and only Rs. 57,000 was left for general states expenditure. Other than this amount, there was no cash revenue from the internal taxation, which was paid in kind to the heads of Dzongs and monasteries.” Thus, the amount of revenue was not large enough to require elaborate budgeting or auditing procedures. Moreover, the kings never thought it wise for their people to know the revenue of the state.

The first two kings were successful in creating a highly centralized system in which the royal power came close to absolutism as is possible in a traditional
society with feudal background and heritage. The Bhutanese economy was pastoral and non-monetized with hardly any technological base. Whatever resources were there, it was held by the state and couldn’t pursue economic development due to lack of funds. The British provided the resources simply to discourage the royals not to align with Communist China.

**Disaggregating Bhutan Economic Environment from 1952 to the Present**

The third king initiated the shift in the policy. Bhutan was never colonized and was not linked with the international economy, as it was a subsistence one. It did not experience the trauma of a vertical relationship with metropolitan countries, nor did it realize the vulnerability of its own economy in the face of internal capitalist development. The only alternative was to pursue a dependent development strategy. He decided to give away the policy of isolation, worked out his own strategy of development and modernization, and adopted mixed economic development planning to change hut-oriented economy.

The first thing the third king undertook was to reform the agrarian structure. The land distribution system before was highly unequal. Most of the land was owned by landed elites, the state and monastic institutions. The agrarian structures was dominated by a handful of aristocratic families such as dung, choeji, and lamas, who often had the religious prominence and played a dominant role in the social as well as political arenas of the Bhutanese polity, while the great majority of households were the taxpayers (khrelpa) and those of the “serf” class were known by varying indigenous names across regions. Taxpaying peasants did have their own land, and a very minimal amount belonged to the “serfs.” The land was also the main source of livelihood and power.

There was no migration from one region to another up to 1952. The third king initiated the land reforms. In 1953, landless people of the Eastern province were settled in the Western province. It has been noted that despite the existence of a bond agreement restricting the people of the eastern province to migrate to the west, His Majesty the King was pleased to observe that, whereas the eastern province was suffering from scarcity of land, there were large areas of uncultivated land in the western province. As such, the existing restriction on the migration of eastern people to the western province had now been lifted and they were hereafter permitted to migrate to the western province and settle at Punakha, Thimphu and Wangdiphodrang—they would be exempted from the payment of taxes for certain years during their settlement—necessary assistance required for house construction and land development would be made available to them. . . . The Assembly suggested that the issue of a circular (Kasho) to this effect had to be considered by His Majesty the King.134
Serfdom was formally abolished and the serfs were freed in 1956. The next stage of the land reform came only in 1958 after the end of the “serf” system. The eleventh session of the National Assembly session indicated that: “A household possessing [twenty-five] acres of land registered in the land records would neither be permitted to purchase more land nor to receive additional land as gift. In case of households with a single son or daughter possessing more than [twenty-five] acres, all the land in excess of [twenty-five] acres would be confiscated by the government after the decease of the parents.”135 Thus, the land ceiling was imposed at twenty-five acres, and any excess land found was claimed by the government to redistribute to the landless peasants. Land reform in 1959 involving legislation on the land ceiling and redistribution of surplus land and subsequent state policy interventions have determined that land and other resources are distributed throughout society. The state maintains ownership and control of most of the national resource base. The land grant (kidu) is a continuing process even today.136

The agrarian reform was mainly instituted as a means to reduce the power of political-landed elites in the advent of state modernization. The land reform has significantly eliminated the base of traditional landed political elites. By breaking down the various loci of power, there was gradual reorganization of the administrative structure.137 It has been demonstrated that agrarian reform was an effective political strategy for state modernization and legitimization by reducing and weakening the power of the political/landed elites, whose power remained rooted in land and land ownership in their respective jurisdictions.138 Thus, with removal of the serf system along with agrarian reform, the redistribution of land to the landless was undertaken. This has transformed peasants into ordinary taxpaying households.

It is a little surprising that an elaborated statement of the country’s development objectives did not accompany the beginning of the new era. In fact, a comprehensive formulation of the national development vision has only recently been included in an official government document. The aims and objectives of development have been outlined as follows: to increase GDP; to ensure the emotional well-being of the population; and to preserve Bhutan’s cultural heritage and its rich and varied natural resources. This declaration builds upon a catch phrase, “Gross National Happiness” (GNH), which was introduced by the fourth king in the late 1980s and has rapidly evolved into the accepted label for the distinct Bhutanese development concept. The concept of GNH has organically evolved from the constituent features of Bhutanese society before
1959, a socioeconomic system based on a Buddhist and feudal set of values. The expression GNH is essentially a summarization of the basic tenets of Vajrayana Buddhism, the state religion of Bhutan. The development strategy of Bhutan seeks to strike an appropriate balance among social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental goals. This vision of GNH has been articulated and groomed into the overall guiding principles for the development of Bhutanese society and economy.

Bhutan officially embarked on the first planned economic development in 1961. The first and second plan were mainly financial budgeting exercises rather than attempts to work out a framework of priorities. To implement these plans, a self-contained development secretariat was established. So far Bhutan has successfully carried out ten five-year plans and initiated an eleventh five-year plan. The income of state was variously estimated on a rough basis. Up to the early 1960s, there was no finance department. However, this does not mean there was a lack of financial control or an absence of accounting or auditing of receipts and expenditure. Before this, Gyaltsi Khalowa had allocated the funds in the palace and thereafter by the Finance Ministry for the first few years. A Secretariat of Finance was established in order to facilitate the flow of cash in the country. It was upgraded to a Ministry of Finance in 1968. In that same year, the Bank of Bhutan, which was the first commercial bank, was established. Thus, it was only in 1971 that a formal budget allocation of funds to the various departments on regularized basis was introduced. In 1972, all departmental budgets, including the Department in Development Ministry, were brought under the Ministry of Finance. Accordingly, in 1972, change in allocation procedure shifted the responsibility from Development Ministry to the Ministry of Finance. Due to Bhutan’s late start to modernization, the economy remains in a considerably underdeveloped state. The government has been and remains the driving force behind the development of a modern sector of the economy. Bhutan’s economic development from beginning of 1960 up to today can be bracketed together under the six stages.

**Foundation for Development (1961–1971)**

The 1960s witnessed the execution of the first two five-year plans in the country over the period of 1961 to 1971. The resultant expansion of road networks in the country generated two parallel impacts. First, there was a diversion of manpower toward development activities, mainly toward construction, which resulted in labor shortage in agriculture. This affected
agricultural output, at least in the short period.\textsuperscript{143} The creation of wage employment increased the cash inflow and thereby the demand for petty consumer goods. The prices of such goods increased several times. Second, before the closure of the Tibetan border in 1951, Bhutan was supposedly self-sufficient in cereal production. It also enjoyed a small surplus that was exported to Tibet. The decline in demand for food grain in the post-1951 period was compensated by a rise in domestic demand resulting from increased construction activities. The post–second plan period witnessed a further rise in domestic production of food gains. This was also the time when informal trade inflow from India, especially in food and other consumer items, started picking up. The increased road networks brought about a tremendous rise in trade, providing farmers an opportunity to opt for specialized production. The construction of education and health infrastructure also started coming up in a big way. The second effect ultimately proved stronger than the first one, and the economy could consolidate the gains of the past.

\textbf{Consolidation of Gains (1971–1981)}

The third five-year plan (1971–1976)\textsuperscript{144} put an overarching stress on transport, communication, and the social sector like health and education. The allocation on social services was about 31 percent of the total outlay of the plan. The fourth five-year plan (1976–1981) continued to lay emphasis on education, health, and forestry. As a result of the concerted efforts of the government, the country was able to lay down the foundations of socioeconomic development by the end of the 1970s.

The beginning of the 1970s was also a period of anguish for Bhutan due to the untimely demise of the third king, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. However, the void was quickly filled in by the enthronement of Jigme Singye Wangchuck as the fourth king of Bhutan in 1972. Under his leadership, Bhutan embarked upon a path of sustained growth. Here again, the bonds of friendship with India proved strong and Indian assistance in strengthening international recognition for Bhutan was unfaltering.

\textbf{Period of Sustained Growth (1981–1992)}

The process of modern economic development in the country took on greater strength by the fifth five-year plan period (1981–1987). The period witnessed the initiation of limited industrial development in the country. Hydropower
Development was appropriately identified as the main source of revenue generation and an initiator of growth impulses. By the beginning of the sixth five-year plan (1987–1992), Bhutan was able to meet two-thirds of its development budget from internal revenue generation. Although India’s assistance to Bhutan increased in nominal terms, it reduced relatively in the funding of the five-year plans. This was an indication of the growing strength of the Bhutanese economy. The decade of the 1980s put the economy on a higher growth path with real GDP experiencing a quantum jump of 18 percent over 1986 to 1987. The commissioning of the Chukha Hydropower Project proved to be a real boon for the economy as it produced a strong average growth of 8 percent for the whole decade.

**Period of Unpredictable Prosperity (1992–2002)**

The goal of self-sufficiency and less dependency on foreign capital and labor was further emphasized in the seventh five-year plan (1992–1997). The 1990s also witnessed concerted efforts toward the process of decentralization. The eighth five-year plan (1997–2002) crystallized the idea of sustainable development. At the same time, the need for expanding the public sector has been felt and measures initiated for its development. The growth of hydropower projects resulted in a growth of the industrial sector in the country. However, as has been already explained, the average annual growth rate of the economy during the 1990s could not match that of 1980s. The economy suffered during the beginning of the decade due to political turbulence in the South and East of Bhutan. A recovery was witnessed only at the end of the decade. Growth fluctuated a great deal over the period of 1990s, once again to decelerate in the post-2000 period.

**Period of Accelerating Growth (2002–2012)**

Growth was robust during the ninth and tenth five-year plans, driven by the development of the hydropower sector. However, growth slowed due to policy efforts to moderate aggregate demand to ameliorate overheating pressures. Downside risks remain due to high public debt, potential financial sector vulnerabilities, and the need to manage recurrent pressures on Indian rupee reserves. The main external vulnerability stems from prolongation of the slowdown in India, Bhutan’s main trade and development partner.

The objective of the eleventh five-year plan for 2013 to 2018 is “self-reliance and inclusive green socioeconomic development.” One of its three strategic thrusts is on accelerated green economic development. The plan emphasizes achieving economic diversification through a focus on the development of sectors other than hydropower and on fostering the growth of a dynamic private sector that catalyzes a transition to a green economy. The Rapid Investment in Selected Enterprises Program is going to be the flagship program for accelerating economic growth. The program forms the cornerstone of the government’s diversification strategy and aim to develop non-hydropower sectors such as tourism, agro-processing, construction, small and cottage industries, including cultural industries, and manufacturing.

Over the past fifty-five years, Bhutan has been able to sustain a strong growth rate and develop hydropower as an important resource and a chief export. Bhutan has also increased interactions at the bilateral and multilateral levels. Bhutan’s development strategy has gradually started moving toward incorporating the benefits of globalization and increasing participation in international trade through structural changes geared at ensuring faster growth and economic diversification. The process of economic reforms in Bhutan is driven by domestic needs as well as influence from external developments, especially those occurring in the neighboring countries. In light of this, the process of economic reforms in Bhutan can be described as an attempt to make up for discrepancies in policies with regard to its major economic development partners. Another way of looking at the process of economic reforms in Bhutan is from the participatory requirement point of view. Bhutan’s perceived need to join international communities and share the benefits of liberalization has propelled its active commitment under several forums and treaties within, and outside the subregion. Today, Bhutan is committed to join the World Trade Organization, and a constant perusal of policy is required to fulfill the requirements of the World Trade Organization and to benefit from the new regime.

**Economic Performance**

In fact, fifty years back, except for a minute proportion of the elite, the social structure, value system, and lifestyle of the Bhutanese did not differ very much from that of their ancestors around 1500. The vast majority of the population spent their lives as subsistence farmers, almost totally dependent on the yield of some acres of agricultural land and the adjoining forests. Where a small surplus
was achieved, it was bartered since money was virtually unknown. Due to the complete absence of motorable roads, all goods had to be transported on mule tracks. The health infrastructure of the whole country consisted of four hospitals staffed with two trained doctors, a handful of dispensaries, and a leper colony. Epidemics, which sometimes wiped out whole villages, reduced the life expectancy to an estimated average of thirty-eight years in 1960. Under these circumstances, education was considered a luxury and unnecessary for survival. Thus, the end of the 1950s saw only 440 children enrolled in the country’s formal education system, consisting of eleven primary schools. Until the 1950s, the only education available in Bhutan was monastic.

Today, it is difficult to refute that the kingdom’s contemporary developmental situation is different. Increased income-generation activities have raised the per capita income, exceeding the income of its South Asian neighbors. There has been a steady increase in per capita incomes to middle-income levels and substantial reduction in poverty, along with marked improvement in social indicators. Bhutan has made steady progress in improving the welfare of its population and in growing the economy. As an example, it is enough to bring to light some of the quantitative indicators to cogently elucidate the economic performance.

Formal, secular education was introduced as part of the reforms instigated by the third king. The government currently spends about 5.1 percent of GDP on education or 17 percent of the budget is allocated to education. There are 554 schools, 111 extended classrooms, and 9,000 teachers for 172,000 students. There are ten tertiary institutes operating under the auspices of the Royal University of Bhutan, seven vocational, seventy-four non-formal educational centers, and one medical university. Nearly every child in Bhutan now has access to education within an hour’s walking distance from home. They have achieved gender parity in school attendance at the primary level of education and are on track toward achieving universal attendance at the primary level with the adjusted net primary enrollment ratio at 98.5 percent. Considerable improvements in the availability of education have been made in recent years. Universal primary education has been achieved, and secondary education enrollment ratios have risen considerably in recent years. Middle-secondary enrollments increased in total from 48,716 in 2007 to 50,102 in 2011, whereas those in higher secondary doubled from 14,963 in 2007 to 28,799 in 2011. The gross enrollment ratio for secondary schools was 70 percent in 2011. Tertiary enrollments are also encouraging, with the Royal University of Bhutan
increasing student numbers from 3,550 in 2007 to 6,315 in 2011. Many students attend colleges and universities in India. The adult literacy rate is 52.8 percent, and the share of the population with at least a secondary education was 34.4 percent in 2011. These figures reflect the comparatively recent development of mass education in the country.

Starting with the bare minimum in health services in the 1960s, Bhutan has 25 hospitals, 205 basic health units, 519 outreach clinics, 193 doctors, 799 nurses, and 455 health assistants to ensure that all people receive free and good primary healthcare. A total of 94.8 percent of Bhutanese live within a maximum of three hours’ distance to a health facility. The three referral hospitals ensure that the people have access to specialized healthcare. Health investments and commitments have reaped significant dividends. Life expectancy is now 67.28 years from 37 years in 1960. The infant mortality rate is 30, down from 102.8 (deaths per 1,000 live births) in 1984. The maternal mortality ratio is 86, down from 777 (deaths per 100,000 live births) in 1984.

The number of tourists visiting Bhutan has been steadily increasing. In 2013, 116,200 tourists visited Bhutan. Of them, about 63,500 tourists were from India and 53,000 were from other countries. Tourism contributed Nu. 16.2 billion to the economy and Nu. 1.1 billion to government revenue. In addition, tourism provided 18,200 jobs, from the guides and drivers, who accompany the tourists, to waiters and cooks working in hotels.

Bhutan has about thirteen thousand cottage and small enterprises. They comprise 97 percent of all the businesses, but they contribute only 3 percent to the economy, and they are concentrated mainly in Thimphu, Phuentsholing, and Gelephu. Bhutan is blessed with abundant minerals. The quality and quantity of limestone, marble, dolomite, gypsum, talc, and quartzite available here is higher than elsewhere in the region. However, mining contributed only Nu. 2,000 million to the economy last year, which is less than 2 percent of the economy. The contribution to the government revenue was only Nu. 434 million.

Today, Bhutan has around 25,310 well-qualified and experienced civil servants. With one out of every thirty Bhutanese in the civil service, this is one of the highest ratios in the world. Of the 25,310 civil servants, 8,444 are women and only 20 out of 241 are in the executive levels. For the first time in the Bhutanese history, in 2014, Bhutan named its first woman minister and the first woman ambassador.

The population is small with 748,500 people, and the growth rate is only 1.3 percent. The population is very young with 30 percent below fifteen years and
56 percent under twenty-four years. The youth unemployment rate (fifteen to twenty-four years) at 9.6 percent is significantly higher than the national unemployment rate at 2.9 percent. Bhutan has more than 4,500 young people today seeking employment. It is estimated that in the eleventh five-year plan, seventy-five thousand jobs need to be created. Today, 4.8 percent of the population or thirty-five thousand people are above the age of sixty-five years. The labor force size increased from 256,895 persons in 2005 to 318,688 in 2015, an addition of 61,793 persons. Hence the economy needs to generate a 24 percent increase in employment opportunities in 2015. Employment in the modern sector is currently limited predominantly to public service and small-scale trade; this is limited to seven thousand jobs, around half of them occupied by expatriates. Unlike many developing countries, unemployment is not yet a big problem, and the traditional sector is providing adequate employment. However, the creation of productive employment for an expanding rural and urban population is a crucial issue. Despite the progress made in the development of a modern sector and in the field of education, many young Bhutanese are neither given appropriate opportunities nor equipped with the skills required to fulfill their increasing aspirations.

As per the Population and Housing Census of Bhutan 2005, rural to urban migration (111,770) accounted for the highest population move followed by rural to rural migration (111,548) within the country. There were about 19,992 people who moved from urban to rural areas, whereas 23,874 people moved from urban to urban centers. The rural and urban composition was 69.1 percent and 30.9 percent, respectively, and the population density was sixteen persons per square kilometer.

Table 1.1 depicts that Bhutan’s Human Development Index (HDI) score has improved. Bhutan’s HDI value for 2013 is 0.584, which is in the medium human development category, positioning the country at 136 out of 187 countries and territories. Between 2010 and 2013, Bhutan’s HDI value increased from 0.569 to 0.584, an increase of 2.7 percent or an average annual increase of about 0.88 percent. A review of Bhutan’s progress in each of the HDI indicators shows that between 1980 and 2013, Bhutan’s life expectancy at birth increased by 23.3 years, mean years of schooling stayed the same, and expected years of schooling increased by 8.4 years. Bhutan’s gross national income per capita increased by about 536.2 percent between 1980 and 2013. Bhutan’s 2013 HDI of 0.584 is below the average of 0.614 for countries in the medium human development group and below the average of 0.588 for countries in South Asia.
Table 1.1. Bhutan’s Human Development Index Trends

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Life Expectancy at Birth</th>
<th>Expected Years of Schooling</th>
<th>Mean Years of Schooling</th>
<th>Gross National Income per Capita (2011 PPP$)</th>
<th>Human Development Index Value</th>
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</tbody>
</table>


Bhutan has a Gender Inequality Index value of 0.495, ranking it 102 out of 149 countries in the 2013 index. In Bhutan, 6.9 percent of parliamentary seats are held by women, and 34.0 percent of adult women have reached at least a secondary level of education compared to 34.5 percent of their male counterparts. For every 100,000 live births, 180 women die from pregnancy-related causes; the adolescent birth rate is 40.9 births per 1,000 live births. Female participation in the labor market is 66.4 percent compared to 76.9 percent for men.

The most recent survey data that were publicly available for Bhutan Multidimensional Poverty Index estimation refer to 2010. In Bhutan, 29.4 percent of the population are multidimensional poor, while an additional 18 percent are near multidimensional poverty. The breadth of deprivation (intensity) in Bhutan, which is the average of deprivation scores experienced by people in multidimensional poverty, is 43.5 percent. The Multidimensional Poverty Index, which is the share of the population that is multidimensionally poor, adjusted by the intensity of the deprivations, is 0.128. An estimated 12 percent of the population is poor, and poverty in rural areas at 16 percent is higher than poverty in urban areas at 1.8 percent. Bhutan’s Multi-dimensional Poverty Report 2012 revealed that the largest contributor to national poverty was deprived education at 43 percent. Notably, poverty remains predominantly a rural phenomenon, and considerable regional disparities exist with more than half of the twenty dzongkhags having poverty rates above the national average of 12 percent, with Lhuentse having the highest poverty rate at 31.9 percent.
Development has brought some changes in structure of the economy. The structural changes in terms of sector-wise contribution to GDP, as exhibited in Table 1.2, reflects that the economy has modernized as the share of the secondary and tertiary sectors in the GDP has increased. Bhutanese economy has undergone structural changes thanks to export of electricity and power-intensive products like cement, dolomite, gypsum, and so forth.

Table 1.2. Share of Gross Domestic Product by Major Sector in Current Prices (2009–2013) in Percentage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Primary Sector</th>
<th>Secondary Sector</th>
<th>Tertiary Sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>31.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>39.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>18.23</td>
<td>41.97</td>
<td>39.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>16.80</td>
<td>42.78</td>
<td>40.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>16.33</td>
<td>40.98</td>
<td>42.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>15.96</td>
<td>41.62</td>
<td>42.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>16.18</td>
<td>42.30</td>
<td>41.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 1.3 shows the decomposition of economic growth by sector over 1980 to 2012. The rapid growth of hydropower, manufacturing, construction, and mining sectors compared to agriculture has led to a noteworthy change in the composition of GDP. Even though over 60 percent of the population depends on agriculture, forestry, and livestock, the share of this primary sector was only 16.8 percent of GDP in 2013. The secondary and tertiary sectors have now become the main driving force of the economy, contributing 39.3 percent and 43 percent of GDP, respectively. In recent years, electricity, construction, hotels and restaurants, and transport and communications have been the main contributors to growth.

Table 1.3. Economic Growth Rate by Sector 1980–2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Agriculture</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Growth Rate/Year</td>
<td>Gross Domestic</td>
<td>Average Growth</td>
<td>Contribution to Gross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The phenomenal growth rates experienced by Bhutan over the last three decades are some of the highest over such a long period of time. The average annual growth rate in Bhutan over 1981 to 2012 was 7.87 percent, and on a per capita basis, 5.89 percent. While average economic growth has been high, it has also been quite volatile over time. This variance is due to the high proportion of economic output pertaining to the hydropower sector and its rapid, albeit lumpy, growth. The observed growth spikes reflect peaks in action detected during the construction and commissioning of hydropower projects. The most striking growth spikes occurred in 1987, when the Chhukha Hydropower Plant was constructed, propelling Bhutan’s growth rate to over 28 percent that year. The most recent decade was also influenced by a number of large hydropower projects—particularly the operational opening of the Kurichhu and Tala plants. However, as more plants come into operation, the proportionate growth spikes caused by new hydropower construction projects have become smaller over time compared with larger overall output. The average growth rate of the Bhutanese economy has become more stable as a result. The rapid growth of the Bhutanese economy has been characterized by commensurately rapid structural change.

The driving sector of Bhutan’s growth performance is clearly the industrial sector. In each of the three subperiods—1980 to 1990, 1991 to 2000, and 2001 to 2012—the growth rate in the hydropower-dominated industrial sector strongly exceeds the overall growth rate in the economy, reaching a peak decadal growth rate of 22.6 percent in the earliest period, and 6.7 percent and 10.3 percent per annum in the subsequent periods, respectively. This compares with growth rates of 10.1 percent, 5 percent, and 8.4 percent over the respective periods for the total economy.

The second highest contributor to growth has been the service sector of the economy, which in recent years has comprised mainly of tourism and services
related to tourism. The average annual growth rates in this sector have been strong and less volatile relative to the industrial sector. The service sector has achieved an average annual growth rate of 8.8 percent over the whole period, and thus its growth rate has also exceeded the total economic growth rate.

With the growth rate in the industrial and service sectors exceeding the economy-wide average growth rate, the agricultural sector has been steadily proportionately displaced. Growing at an average annual rate of 3.1 percent—less than half the economy-wide average over this period—agriculture comprised only 14.5 percent of the economy by 2012. Yet agriculture remains the major source of employment, with 62.2 percent of the labor force employed in what is mainly subsistence agriculture. Thus, while employment in agriculture has also seen a decline over recent decades, almost 20 percentage points in the last decade, the fall in the proportion of employment in this sector has not been commensurate with that of the value of output. The mismatches between value added and employment in the economy has implications for the distribution of income and welfare generated by the long growth upswing and is indicative of the need for future restructuring and up-skilling of the labor force to ensure that growth is more evenly distributed. In essence, the hydropower sector’s dominance in the Bhutanese economy has implications on the concentration and distribution of economic activities. In fact, even within the industrial sector, existing industries such as construction, cement, chemicals, wood-based, and metals industries, even though the latter four are shrinking proportionately, are also highly dependent on and synchronized with the hydropower sector, making much of the industrial activity, itself highly correlated. Thus, the economy is quite vulnerable to any shocks impacting on the hydropower sector, which is highly dependent on grants and international financing.

The quantitative indicators show that Bhutan’s economy has been performing reasonably well with strong average yearly growth rate of 8.7 percent between 2005 and 2013. Since 2011, the economy has been experiencing unprecedented macroeconomic policy challenges arising from a combination of related factors that include a surge in capital inflows for hydropower development, rapid credit expansion, successive buildup of current account deficits with India, and consequently an acute and persistent shortfall in rupee reserves that has yet to be effectively addressed. Despite all the optimism, there is also growing skepticism regarding the pace and sustainability of growth in Bhutan. There are concerns and downsides of economy, as elaborated below.
At only Nu. 104 billion, the economy is amongst the smallest economies in the world, ranked at 166 out of 190 countries according to World Bank. A major factor for concern is Bhutan’s growing external debt. Kuensel notes that,

The country’s stock of outstanding external debt saw an increase of 9.5 percent between June 2013 and June 2014. In three months, from June to September 2014, debt swelled to 108 percent from 101 percent of the GDP size. This means the total debt today exceeds the size of the economy by eight percent. In absolute terms, from USD 1.6 billion in June 2013, the total debt increased to USD 1.8 billion in 2014. The Royal Monetary Authority’s annual report revealed a growth of 10.6 percent in rupee debt, and 8.7 percent growth on debt pertaining to convertible currency.

The total public debt stock, 99 percent of which is external borrowings, is expected to increase by 135 percent in the eleventh five-year plan, from Nu. 110 billion in 2013/2014 to Nu 259 billion in 2017/2018. Of the total debt, 80 percent is denominated in Indian rupees on account of borrowings for hydropower projects, which are expected to increase by 184 percent from Nu. 73 billion to Nu. 206 billion. The debt has been increasing substantially and is expected to be 121 percent of GDP.

The skepticism has been fueled by the rupee crunch phenomenon. This has led many analysts to question the economic model of deep integration with India that Bhutan has followed over the last few decades. Trade deficit is almost 20 percent of GDP. Bhutan has limited exports, with hydropower being the main export. However, imports are much more, hence the trade deficit. The current account deficit is 30 percent.

Growth continues to be driven largely by government spending and investment. The industrial sector continues to be dominated by a few large state-owned enterprises, mostly under the umbrella of Druk Holding Investments, with the hydropower subsector constituting almost 20 percent of GDP. The manufacturing subsector accounts for only one-fifth of the industrial sector output and is narrowly concentrated in food processing and cottage industries. The lack of economic diversification has resulted in a situation of high growth rates driven by the hydropower sector without a commensurate increase in gainful employment for a rapidly growing and educated labor force, which poses significant macroeconomic challenges.

The investments in hydropower are lumpy in nature with long gestation periods. As a result, the growth pattern is volatile with output expansion spiking in the years during the construction and installation of a new hydropower plant and then falling until the next hydropower plant comes on stream. This trend, along with a narrow domestic economic base, makes the economy vulnerable to
cyclical swings and external shocks. Given Bhutan’s projections regarding hydropower investment, Bhutan’s growth prospect for the next twenty years will likely be underpinned by further development of its abundant hydropower resources.

Bhutan’s economic freedom score is 56.7, making its economy the 116th freest in the 2014 index. Declines of about ten points in both investment freedom and monetary freedom have helped to keep the country within the status of “mostly unfreeze” in the index.\textsuperscript{151} Doing business in Bhutan is difficult, and a variety of impediments prevent the emergence of a fully functioning market economy. Distance from markets, the country’s landlocked location, difficulty in obtaining credit, a shortage of rupees used as an alternate currency, inadequate investment protection regulations, and the high costs of trading across borders are among the problems facing entrepreneurs in Bhutan. In the World Bank’s 2014 Doing Business survey, Bhutan received consistently low rankings for many of the items examined, particularly getting credit (2), protecting investment (6), dealing with construction permits (5), and resolving insolvency (8) and private enterprise (7). However, the country received better rankings for starting a business (3), registering property (2), and enforcing contracts (1). It has been given a rank of 125th place out of 189 countries.\textsuperscript{152}

There are no laws on anti-competitive practices, monopolies, and cartels, but a Consumer Protection Act was passed in 2012. This has given a slight boost to competition in the economy as government price regulation to some degree helps to prevent the development of monopolies. Non-tax revenues dominate government income. In this regard, the state possesses considerable advantages derived from its ownership and measured exploitation of the natural resource base. Given the low surpluses within the traditional sector, revenues are predominantly accrued from the modern sector of the economy. Bhutan economy is a state-owned enterprise, which accounts for 50 percent of tax revenue. Hydropower accounts for 85 percent of that revenue. However, it will become increasingly important to broaden the tax base and make the tax structure more efficient.

Agriculture remains the major source of income and employment for the majority of Bhutan’s population. There is little growth in the agriculture sector. Eighty-five percent of the population depends on agriculture and other traditional activities in the rural sector. The vast majority of Bhutanese earn their living within the traditional sector of the economy. Although the continued expansion of the modern sector will facilitate a gradual change in the
employment structure, this situation is unlikely to change in the near future. A total of sixty-five thousand farming families owns an average of agricultural landholding of 1.5 hectares per household. A total of 16 percent of Bhutan land is suitable for agriculture. Of this, only around 8 percent is under cultivation. The mountainous terrain and fragile ecology do not allow for any expansion, limiting development in this sector. Although 59.3 percent of the labor force was in agriculture in 2013, agriculture accounted for only 14.4 percent of GDP. There is still a strong subsistence character to much agricultural production.

The state has played a dominant role in modernizing Bhutan. In the absence of a significant private sector, it has established many enterprises. Corporatized state-owned enterprises are the biggest businesses in the country, and they dominate fields including power generation and distribution, postal services, airlines, banking, and television. Bhutan’s first private medical practices opened in June 2012. There are only a few private schools and colleges. The government is involved in pricing such items as gasoline, bus fares, and even basic necessities like meat. Some of these have been privatized and others corporatized, but a substantial state-owned enterprise sector that includes monopolies in areas such as television, electricity, and postal services remains. There are few large private-sector corporations. While the private sector is portrayed as the engine of growth in Bhutan, it remains small and underdeveloped.

The economic development based on mixed economic philosophy and controversial GNH\textsuperscript{153} to obtain maximum output, employment and income through joint efforts of public and private sectors failed as radical economic policy of neoliberalism pushed by governments smashed the intermediary economic structures—small-scale industries, indigenous means of livelihoods, and social economy producing crony capitalism. If the economic and legal environments remain tilted toward elites, reforms will likely further consolidate wealth and power in the hands of well-connected insiders. Thus, within a short time, privatization created a powerful small circle of fabulously wealthy business elites. Privatization in Bhutan was supposed to create thousands of independent property owners and foster the growth of a middle class with a commitment to continued reform. In reality, however, the manner in which privatization took place ensured that the new economic elite of Bhutan were created by the state and remained closely tied to the state. The elites, some of whom controlled media outlets, became an indispensable part of the king’s base of support.
A central problem for the Bhutan labor market is that most of the country’s university graduates have government jobs. Indeed, the government employs an astonishing 90 percent of the workforce. Most Bhutanese continue to be attracted to the government’s relaxed working hours along with its generous salaries and benefit policies. It is important to remember that Bhutan is a single commodity, that is, energy-producing, country that has failed to devise a strategy for economic diversification. Bhutan today spends 60 percent of its income and 80 percent of its annual budget on government salaries. With today’s high price of energy, Bhutan is doing well and can balance its budget. A steep drop in prices, however, could make it difficult for Bhutan to meet its salary and other commitments.

The private capital of the commercial class is one of the most important factors for Bhutan’s future development. Yet the biggest complaint from potential investors has been the Bhutanese bureaucracy and restrictions on the private sector, much of which is overly dependent on the government for contracts and projects. The continued emergence of the private sector in both rural and urban areas will be of fundamental importance, integrating the population as stakeholders in the development process, increasing options and opportunities, and creating channels for the fulfillment of changing aspirations. The findings support the conclusion that the palace has coopted the process of economic liberalization to replenish its patron-clientele network and enhance its international legitimacy. Therefore, economic liberalization might actually have a negative relationship with political reform.

Conclusion

If we look at the economic performance of Bhutan, it has made good progress. However, the benefits could not percolate and trickle down on an equitable basis to the majority Bhutanese. The economic development is not commensurate to alleviate the problems of the people. Development and modernization have failed to generate any mass benefits in terms of peasants’ improved life chances. Thus, the economic development of Bhutan can easily excite some and depress others. The rapid process of economic development could not act as a panacea for struggling Bhutanese. It is apparently clear now that it has failed to ameliorate the problems of poor and ensures stability and promotes loyalties to the state from all sections and groups within the societies. Bhutan has adopted the “gradualist approach” in the implementation of economic reforms and results were the moderate pace of economic progress. Moreover, the market-based
economic reforms since 1990 have failed to market these reforms to the masses as being highly beneficial to them. The reforms look more pro-rich and anti-poor. It warrants more need-based, pro-poor reforms than elite-based reforms. Market-based reforms have not drawn mass appeal nor were made to arouse mass passion. The economic growth failed to generate jobs. Thus, Bhutan’s economic growth seems impressive on some fronts and satisfactory in others, but hopelessly inadequate to ameliorate the conditions of the majority poor. Bhutan has not reached the socioeconomic threshold considered conducive to democracy. The development could not trickle down as either the trickle is so tiny, it is barely noticed by those trickled upon or else it takes a very long time for the trickle to reach any appreciable magnitude. The privileged class collaborates with state, bureaucracy, and military, and resorts to activities to protect their interests.

**BHUTAN’S ECONOMIC AND SOCIOCULTURAL RELATIONS WITH NEIGHBORS**

Many authors have identified economic dependence, the demonstration effect of democracy in neighboring countries, and other facets of the international environment as factors for democratic transition. Good neighbors can exert constructive political pressure to bolster the democratic transition. Huntington argues that democratization in a country may be influenced by “the actions of governments and institutions external to that country. Successful demonstrations in one country can encourage demonstrations elsewhere since they create a contagion effect.” The strategic interaction between domestic actors and patron states has been surprisingly disregarded in the case of Bhutan. When confronted with the prospect of democratization with one of its dependent allies, or clients, a democratic patron faces the dilemma between an ideological preference for democracy promotion and national interests that favor client stability. Democracy confers domestic and international legitimacy. However, the patron depends on the client to provide alliance goods, such as natural resources, economic access, and security commitments.

Bhutan is physically small with limited economic dimensions and military might. While Bhutan has historical ties with Tibet, its less definite dealings with China since the 1950s and the shedding of an isolationist policy gradually led Bhutan to develop political orientation toward India. Since the 1950s, Bhutan’s
foreign policy focused on building a close relationship with its southern neighbor, thereby enhancing its territorial security and prospects for socioeconomic development. At the same time, the Himalayas to the Indians were natural barriers that could enhance India’s security vis-à-vis China.\textsuperscript{160} Having abandoned a strategy of self-imposed isolation, Bhutan has looked to increase economic interaction with other countries. Regional integration with its neighbors has become imperative for Bhutan in overcoming the hurdles posed by its small domestic market and lack of capital available to take advantage of trade and commercial opportunities in hydropower, tourism, textiles, and traditional Himalayan herbs. Therefore, Bhutan continues to explore regional cooperation that is to its advantage.

In the milieu of this deep-seated truth, this part of chapter 1 has explored Bhutan’s economic and sociocultural relations with its neighbors, India and China. This section mainly reflects on the various facets of Bhutan’s political economy in relation to neighboring countries in the region.

**Economic Relations between Bhutan and India**

Owing to their geographic location, Bhutan and India are natural partners, and their future is inseparable. Françoise writes that: “Bhutan carried out a substantial trade with her southern neighbors—Bengal (Cooch Bihar) and Assam (Kamrup)—at least from the [seventeenth] century, if not earlier.”\textsuperscript{161} Bhutan and India signed the Indo Bhutan Treaty in 1949 (revised in 2007), which envisaged friendship, cooperation, and a free trade regime between the two countries. Providing the basic framework for bilateral trade and other areas of economic relations between Bhutan and India, negotiations and agreements in trade and commerce have been worked out from time to time within the overall framework of this treaty.\textsuperscript{162}

Although, the trade relations between the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal dates back to colonial period, it witnessed new dimension since 1961 with the launch of the first five-year plan of Bhutan. Today, India stands as Bhutan’s largest development partner. The Indian government has been a major donor for five-year plans of Bhutan since 1961.\textsuperscript{163} While bilaterally the partnership has broadened over a variety of issue areas, trust and goodwill between both countries has only deepened. Indian assistance to Bhutan has covered a wide range of areas representing the intensification of bilateral relations over time. To date, the areas of cooperation have been infrastructure,
communication, hydroprojects, road network, skilled manpower under technical assistance program, and many others.\textsuperscript{164}

India is not only Bhutan’s main development partner but also its leading trade partner. A free trade regime exists between India and Bhutan. The India-Bhutan Trade and Commerce Agreement are renewed every ten years. Being a landlocked country, the Agreement on Trade and Commerce also provides for duty-free transit of Bhutanese merchandise for trade with third countries.\textsuperscript{165} Currently, the major items of exports from Bhutan to India are electricity, ferro alloys, cement, timber and wood products, minerals, cardamom, fruit products, potatoes, oranges and apples, raw silk, and alcoholic beverages. Major exports from India to Bhutan are petroleum products, rice, automobiles and spares, machinery, and fabrics.

With India being the destination for over 90 percent of Bhutanese exports and the source of imports for over 70 percent of total imports, trade relations between both countries are only growing. During 2009, imports from India were of the order of Rs. 23.3 billion and constituted 80 percent of Bhutan’s total imports. Bhutan’s exports to India in 2009 amounted to Rs. 20.5 billion and constituted 94 percent of its total exports. During 2010, imports from India amounted to Rs. 2,930 cores and constituted 75 percent of Bhutan’s total imports. Its exports to India in 2010 amounted to Rs. 2,600 cores and constituted 90 percent of its total exports. In 2010, its imports from India were 29.30 billion and exports were 26.0 billion. In 2011, it was 25.75 billion and 35.18 billion, respectively.\textsuperscript{166} Exports to India increased by 8.5 percent, compared to a 6 percent growth in imports. In 2013, total bilateral trade reached Nu. 72.6 billion, with Bhutan’s imports from India estimated at Nu. 43.6 billion and exports to India at Nu. 28.979 billion. Imports from India increased to 83.5 percent in 2013 from 79.4 percent in 2012.\textsuperscript{167} Given the long and open borders, huge informal trade is also taking place between the two countries. The volume of unofficial/informal/border trade has been estimated to be quite large.\textsuperscript{168} This is an indication of strong complementarities that exist between Bhutan and India.

The vulnerability associated with the Bhutanese economy’s excessive dependence on India occurred in December 2011, when the country’s convertible currency reserves were slashed by 20.4 percent. The main reason for this reduction was the sale of two hundred million dollars to finance the balance of payment transactions with India.\textsuperscript{169} On March 7, 2013, the Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan and the Reserve Bank of India signed the Currency Swap Agreement of Rs. 5.4 billion for six months at a fixed interest rate of 6.5 percent
to ease the Indian Rupees liquidity shortage in the country. The Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement was signed by both the governments in March 2013. The internal procedures for its implementation have been completed, and the agreement came into force on July 17, 2014.\textsuperscript{170}

There is a growing concern over the dependence of the Bhutanese economy on Indian imports and the existence of an informal trade structure across the bordering towns of the two countries. Given the excessive dependence on exports and imports of goods to and from India, Bhutan in 1974 had decided to peg its currency—the ngultrum—at par with the Indian rupee. Thus, by following a fixed exchange rate regime, Bhutan aimed to safeguard competitiveness in order to avoid pressure on the net reserves of the country and also nurture, develop, and maintain confidence in the local currency.\textsuperscript{171} The move to anchor the ngultrum with the Indian currency, however, also meant exposure to the Indian economy. As has been witnessed in the past few years, Bhutan has been highly vulnerable to economic developments in India. Interest rates and prices in Bhutan, for instance, are influenced greatly by commodity prices in India. This has had extensive implications for domestic prices in Bhutan owing to the fact that most of the country’s imports are from India. A manifestation of this was the uncertain inflationary trend in Bhutan since 2011. Inflation in March 2012, for instance, was recorded at 9.4 percent. These price pressures, it is argued, threaten to erode the strong gains in growth made in Bhutan.\textsuperscript{172}

The perspective hints at certain non-comforting issues in India-Bhutan relations. One major reservation that some people have about the India-Bhutan economic partnership is with respect to the “monopoly clause” that India gets with business deals.\textsuperscript{173} Discontentment among Bhutanese, particularly among the business community, is slowly emerging on the surface due to excessive dependence upon India, a study gauged that section of Bhutanese society will lean toward China in future.

\textbf{India and Bhutan: Sociocultural Relations}

Bhutan and India share a common cultural heritage in many ways. In addition to historical background, religious belief also ties India and Bhutan closer. Being a Buddhist kingdom, Bhutan is under heavy influence from religion, and it’s only natural that it has a closer relationship to India. In the fields of education and culture too, India and Bhutan share a high level of interaction. Besides the availability of scholarships to Bhutanese students, there are significant numbers
of Indian teachers, many of whom are posted to teach in remote areas in Bhutan. Under the bilateral cultural exchange program, there have been regular exchanges of cultural troupes and artists between the two countries. For instance, the Government of India hosted a cultural exhibition on Bhutan titled “The Living Religious and Cultural Traditions of Bhutan” at New Delhi and Kolkata. In response to this, and with the greater purpose of strengthening the ties of friendship and creating awareness among the people about the many areas of commonalities between the two countries, a six-month Festival of India was held in Bhutan. Indian religious sites and places are spiritual home for all Bhutanese.

**Economic Relations between Bhutan and China**

In comprehensive power terms, Bhutan is almost a nonentity to China. Bhutan’s biggest disadvantage is its geography that limits its connectivity to India in South and China in the North with no access to sea or any other third country without using either Indian or Chinese land or airspace. Nevertheless, in the geopolitical context of today’s South Asia, Bhutan’s geography has strategic ramifications for both India and China. Though it has no direct access to major waterways or ports, Bhutan is positioned at a strategic location between India and China, controlling several important Himalayan mountain passes.

Bilateral relations of China and Bhutan have, for a long time, been fraught with border disputes. Despite the absence of any formal diplomatic ties, both the countries engaged in direct diplomatic dialogues for the first time in the early 1980s to resolve many of their long-standing conflicting border issues that eventually resulted in the signing of their first bilateral treaty on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along their border areas in 1998. China and Bhutan, until now, have had twenty-two rounds of border talks. They even concluded an “Interim Agreement” in 2002, in connection with China’s claims over some disputed tracts of Bhutan, in order to build trust and confidence. Both the nations have pledged to base their bilateral ties on the “Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence.”

Convergence of interests between Tibet and Bhutan can be traced to the trade links and cultural similarities between the two. Trade and commercial contacts between Bhutan and Tibet took place through the Phari valley in Paro. On the Eastern extreme, the Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh, earlier known as the Tawang tract, was extensively used for trade. History has shown that the Northern routes through twenty thousand-foot passes of the high Himalayas, though tough, have long served as critical connections for merchants from
Bhutan, India, and Tibet. As early as 1773, Bhutan was already a gateway for trade with Tibet, and the British East India Company sent many missions to extend and explore the frontiers and trade routes to Central Asia during the British rule in India.

From the early modern era, Bhutan had been carrying out regular caravan trade on the rugged Himalayan terrain with Bengal on the South and Tibet on the North. This is evident in the contemporary Bengali literature, which refers to several Bhutanese commodities, and also in the writings of foreign travelers. In 1626, a foreign traveler noted that Bhutan was “well provided with Chinese merchandise such as silk, gold and porcelain,” and those came through Tibet. The trade seems largely to be of a transit character since several export commodities—salt, gold, tea, pearls and corals, for example, were not of Bhutanese origin. Both Bengal and Tibetan goods could be spotted in either route along with Bhutanese commodities. The transitional nature of this trade came into the limelight, when the British administration in Bengal temporarily sealed the Bhutan border. Sarkar and Ray wrote: “According to an eighteenth century document, [Bhutan’s] annual trade was worth of Rs 200 thousand with Bengal and Rs 150 thousand with Tibet, including China.”

Sarkar and Ray point out that Bhutan and Lhasa—the prime centers of trade and commerce in the Himalayan belt for centuries—were linked by four alternative routes facilitating round-the-year trade even in case of the political turmoil. They originated from Paro, Punakha, Bumthang, and Trashigang in Bhutan to Lhasa in Tibet. This provides more reason for China to believe that Bhutan could again emerge as an economic hotspot in this region.

The main street in Bhutan’s capital Thimphu reveals most of the merchandise on display is “Made in China”—shoes, silk, toys, heaters, and kitchen utensils. While diplomatic relations between Bhutan and China have yet to be established, the market in the capital city is already flooded with Chinese-made goods. Bhutanese is fast adopting Chinese products and cuisines. Like many countries in the region and beyond, it might not be long before Thimphu has its own little “Chinatown.”

China and Bhutan have sought to extend cooperation in the economic arena. The volume of border trade between China and Bhutan, however, is inconsiderable. China’s exports to and imports from Bhutan amounted to approximately one million US dollars in 2002. In 2006, it was US$0.16 million, which paints a dismal picture. While in 2013, Bhutan’s import from China was about Nu. 1 billion, its exports to China was recorded at Nu. 1.5 million out of
the country’s total exports of Nu. 31.8 billion and imports of Nu. 53.3 billion. Some of the major imports from China were doors, windows, hand tools, and crushing and grinding machines.

This shows that the situation has not changed much as compared to India. This could mean that for China, Bhutan is economically irrelevant. However, even with a small economy, Bhutan would be crucial to Tibet and Tibetans. Bhutan would also be beneficial for China’s ‘Western development strategy,’ that could allow Tibet to regain a central position in the Himalayan region. Certainly, it would provide China with more leverage in Bhutan. China’s often declared intentions to deepen economic cooperation with India’s Northeast, Bangladesh, and Bhutan point toward reviving the above prospects and create many more. The megarail projects that China is building up with significant investment along its entire Himalayan borders with India includes Yadong near the mouth of the Chumbi valley and Nyingchi near Arunachal Pradesh. These rail routes have been planned to enhance the connectivity of Tibet and link its markets with the Himalayan fringe-lands like Bhutan. Of course, it has military dimensions as well, which has compelled India to improve connectivity of these neglected lands and listen to its smaller neighbors. Even bigger opportunities could be created via Bhutan, when the proposed Silk Rail Route’s Southern corridor from Europe to Southeast Asia, via Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, India, Burma, and Thailand, reach this region.

Today, more than three-fourths of Bhutan’s trade is with India, unlike until the 1960s, when Bhutan had a flourishing trade with Tibet. The closing of Bhutan’s Tibet trade and diversification of modern trade into new areas of commerce like tourism, industry, and technology, areas where Bhutan lagged behind, have made Bhutan today an economically backward country. This is in contrast to the period, even during the British domination, when Bhutan was a major trade point.

The influx of Tibetan refugees forced Bhutan to close its border with China in 1959, shutting down all cross-border trade activities. No formal trade or commercial relations have been established between Bhutan and China since then. However, the status quo resulting from the turmoil that followed the integration of Tibet in the People’s Republic of China and the Sino-Indian border conflict in 1962 is about to change. Political contacts resumed in the mid-1980s.

There is no doubt that the process that started in 1984 will eventually result in establishing diplomatic ties between Bhutan and China. Both sides agree that
reaching this step will depend on the solving of the border question. While Bhutan and China have a common interest in the normalization of their bilateral relations, their perspectives remain different. From China’s point of view, resuming trade with Bhutan is part of an overall strategy in the Himalayas, which has been framed in the global context of the development of China’s Western provinces. The resumption of trans-Himalayan trade is a key element of that strategy. China already has border trade with Nepal.\textsuperscript{179} The resuming of trans-Himalayan trade between Tibet and Sikkim will not have immediate consequences for Bhutan, at least in the short term. It is very unlikely that the old Bhutan-Tibet trade pattern would reemerge. As noted by Rose,

a whole new Bhutanese trade pattern has emerged since 1960, based upon ready access to India as both a market and a source of supply, and any change in this trade structure would be highly disruptive to Bhutan’s economy. The removal of the embargo with Tibet, therefore, would have at best a limited impact of Bhutan’s trade system, except possibly in the sparsely populated, but highly strategic northern border areas.\textsuperscript{180}

Although these remarks remain valid, the situation has changed since the 1970s, mainly in Tibet. The case of Outer Mongolia, whose economy has been partly reoriented toward China after the collapse of the Soviet Union, shows that Chinese products can rapidly spread in a new market. In the case of Bhutan, such a pattern would imply the building of roads in Bhutan’s underdeveloped Northern border areas. China would probably be ready to finance such projects as it did in Nepal. However, it is unlikely that Bhutan would consider this option, at least in the current context. In any case, the resuming of border trade with China would allow landlocked Bhutan to have new and promising economic perspectives.

**China and Bhutan: Sociocultural Relations**

Bhutan has a long tradition of cultural and religious interaction with Tibet and shares a common border with China. Yet, the kingdom has been China’s only neighbor that does not have diplomatic relations with China. There are several cultural, social, and religious similarities between the Bhutanese and Tibetans, who have had many interactions for a long time. Tibetan influence had been a decisive factor in the evolution of Bhutan’s social and political structures. However, none of these contacts was politically substantial nor did they provide any kind of subordination. While the formal political relationship between the two countries can be described as independent, their religious and cultural relationship is more ambiguous. They both had theocratic political systems, the
coexistence of which was misleading. Yet the situation was quite clear. “As the most prestigious of Buddhist reincarnates, the Dalai Lama received the greatest degree of respect and deference, but the gifts made to him by the Zhabdrung were not tributes.” The most conclusive evidence of the limitations of Tibetan Government influence in Bhutan is that no monastic institution of the Dalai Lama’s Gelugpa sect was ever allowed in Bhutan. Somewhat more complicated were the relations between the dominant Drukpa sect in Bhutan and its mother monastery in Tibet, Ralung. There was an implicit superior/inferior status in their traditional relation, but because the Drukpa sect was a subordinate sect in a Gelugpa-dominated political system in Tibet, this situation never created any political tutelage over Bhutan.\textsuperscript{181}

Cultural, religious, familial, and economic linkages between Bhutan and Tibet had shaped both the conflictual and cooperative strands between the two. Conflict of interest dates back to the power struggle between the lamas of Tibet and Bhutan, which later metamorphosed into the internecine conflict between the regional governors of Bhutan, some of whom sought Tibetan and Chinese intervention and support to establish their area of influence. Convergence also stemmed from religious ties, as the theocratic system founded by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal was similar to that of Tibet, particularly the belief in reincarnation. However, this religious association was often a source of potential tension, as according to the reincarnation system the trulkus (reincarnates) could be discovered long after the death of the last manifestation. Notably, in the past, a large number of the reincarnate lamas of Bhutanese monasteries had been discovered in Tibet. It is pertinent to note that until 1959,\textsuperscript{182} young Bhutanese lamas went to Tibet, especially to the Dzokchhen monastery in Kham in Eastern Tibet, for their religious education. However, this practice was stopped in 1959, and the lamas now study at the monastic colleges in Punakha and Thimpu.

The cultural and educational relations are weak. Cooperation in areas such as culture and education has not started yet. In 2001, China offered to provide government scholarships to Bhutan, but Bhutanese students still have to learn Chinese. In 2000, the two governments reached agreement on preserving the Bhutanese honorary consulate in China’s Macao Special Administrative Region, but individual exchanges remain minimal. As the number of Chinese visitors in Tibet has been increasing dramatically for a few years, Chinese tourism in Bhutan could also become an option as part of the growing interest of China for its neighbor. As a matter of fact, Chinese media are starting to unveil the charms
of Bhutan to the Chinese public, who largely ignores even the existence of the kingdom.

China is willing to “welcome Bhutanese friends in China to make pilgrimages or to visit relatives and friends.” The resuming of contacts has already started between Buddhists in Bhutan and China. In 2001, the Dorje Lopen, the second highest-ranking lama of the Drukpa sect, visited Wutai Shan in Shanxi province and Emei Shan in Sichuan province, two of China’s sacred Buddhist sites, on the invitation of the Chinese Ministry of Culture. For the time being, Tibet has remained out of the picture, but Bhutanese lamas could easily be invited to visit the Tibet Autonomous Region, like several lay officials, who have already been invited. As a matter of fact, the relations between Bhutan and Tibet go far beyond the religious issue.

**Conclusion**

The external sector continues to be crucial for Bhutan as its socioeconomic development has been largely dependent on contributions from this sector. It is clear from the above discussions that Bhutan is almost totally dependent upon India for everything including its imports and exports. It also shares a deep sociocultural relation. Although Bhutan might not explore the possibility of using China to balance the influence of India, the kingdom has an obvious interest in normalizing its relations with China. Yet, Bhutan’s China policy has limited objectives, at least in the short term. Securing a comprehensive agreement on the boundary question is a priority for Bhutan. In that context, its primary concern is with the settlement of those issues, which have the potential of causing tension on the Northern border. Apprehension over the ultimate objectives of Chinese policy in the Himalayan region has not disappeared in Bhutan. Bhutan will have to incorporate all these factors in its China policy. China’s objectives in the Himalayas are mainly economical as shown by its “Western development strategy.” Yet, political consideration remains essential, both internally and externally. Should Beijing succeed, even partly, in restoring Tibet as a trading bridge in the Himalayas, the geopolitical setting of the whole region would change. Bhutan and Nepal would be at the forefront of the Chinese strategy in the region. Although Bhutan would certainly prefer not to be entangled in regional politics, the kingdom will have to invent a “Chinese real-politics” of its own. As a landlocked country, Bhutan cannot disregard the economic benefits that could result from the resuming of its relations with China. At the same time, pragmatism will prevent Thimphu from undermining
its relation with New Delhi. The above deliberations of economic and sociocultural relations articulately put in the picture that for democracy to be successfully installed and sustained in Bhutan, external pressure and the contagion effect of semi-communist China is inconsequential as compared to overpowering democratic India. China has minimum impact on the politico-socioeconomic infrastructures of the Bhutan at present.¹⁸³

THE BHUTANESE PARADOX: ECONOMIC PROSPERITY WITH SOCIOPOLITICAL SUFFOCATION

Modernization vividly changes the power balance in the society through creating new classes in support of democratic transition. Their attitudes and preferences undermine the traditional agrarian relationships and generate a new set of political values and orientations that usher in democracy. When the pro-democratic force begins to dominate in number, political transformation will take place. To illustrate this, Bhutan’s social, political, and economic structures are thought out in some details in this chapter. Democracy could be instituted and sustained when economic, social, and cultural changes brought about by modernization significantly change the power balance in the society through creating new classes in support of democratic transition. Democracy is a form of politics that can only function with an appropriate socioeconomic infrastructure.

Are the king-initiated political reforms in Bhutan an effect of sociocultural and economic progress since the 1960s, as enumerated above? The Bhutan case has not stood the test of time as compared to the most cited democratization schools of thought, especially in Asia, where the correlation between the levels of socioeconomic development is strongest with democracy in countries such as South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan occurs at around the same time as the establishments of their economic institutions. It is no surprise that many Western scholars and enthusiasts of Bhutanese politics may attribute the reforms in the country’s political system to the changes in economic and social structures. Nevertheless, is this the case of Bhutan? In contrast to advanced capitalist democracies or the more industrialized countries of Asia, the king initiated the political reforms as preemptive measures to impede any opposition to the regime.

As explored above in the consideration of political, social, and economic structures of Bhutan, it has been revealed that:
• The political history of Bhutan is marked by the fragmentation, ineptitude, and disorganization of civil society.
• Conservative elites dominated exclusionary political regimes that went largely uncontested by suppressed and highly demobilized popular sectors.
• The economies were largely dependent on hydropower and agricultural exports, with a minimum presence of foreign capital in Bhutan.
• Sociostructural differentiation was retarded by low level of industrialization.
• Reformist middle classes, working classes, and a politically acquiescent bourgeoisie of the kind that espoused the establishment of liberal democracy in Western Europe are virtually weak or absent in Bhutanese.

Because of these abhorrent socioeconomic structural conditions, review of the Bhutan transition probably has more relevance as compared to transitions of other countries, where earlier industrialization and populism produced different historical actors and political opportunities. The economic growth in Bhutan has led to minuscule economic and social mobilization like urbanization, industrialization, and modernization. This mean low level of political culture of compromising as common political culture, active political participation, and democratic values, adopted equality, in moderation, and so forth. Moreover, social culture such as new balance of social power, rise of new classes—workers, middle strata, old classes losing power, emergence of civil society—is insignificant to creating an environment for democratic transformation. Transformation of the society from an agrarian one to an industrial one entails complex changes in social occupational structure. Development and modernization have not brought significant changes in social occupational structures of Bhutan. The growth of the working class is limited. However, there is small increase in the middle class mostly from ruling elites. Except Lhotsampa Bhutanese, the political awareness was very low among other Bhutanese, particularly among Sharchops.

Has development brought about changes in political culture in Bhutan that are relevant to the likelihood for democracy? It is crystal clear from the above discourse that the political culture has not been altered in noteworthy ways in Bhutan with the advent of modernization and development. The economic growth has not led to dramatic change in Bhutanese political culture. Limited industrialization was not accompanied by huge social mobilization in which new classes were formed, new patterns of behavior forged, and new concepts proliferated. Democratic reforms did not become a shared concern of the
majority of the population. No civil society and unions, and so forth, were set up to provide an organizational base for challenging the government, pestering the authority, eroding the credibility of the regime, intensifying dissent among the political elite, mobilizing international support, and generally setting the political scene for the regime change.

Some mesmerizing structural factors are worth mentioning to reveal and validate the moderately exceptional and unconventional model of Bhutanese modernization. The attention-grabbing factors include dynamic and relatively fast economic progress with negligible industrialization, the escalating resources disparities with a low level of class struggle, a moderately high ratio of uneducated population, and an inaccessible and esoteric country with trifling outside interference.

Bhutan is modernizing without actually undergoing a process of real industrialization. This insinuates that neither a working class nor middle class have developed in mass, and the existing class structure in the society remains relatively unchanged. The middle classes are seen as a driver of the democratization process because middle-class actors play key roles in revolutionary movements. The analysis of transition to democracy places great emphasis on the role of the educated and well-to-do middle class, who demand political concessions from the ruling elites. Without a strong or large middle class, there are fewer incentives to create redistributions from the elites to citizens. As deliberated above, Bhutan’s social and economic transformations have been focused primarily on the basic needs of the citizens, such as free access to education, health, water, sanitation, and electricity, rather than to place high emphasis on developing industries per se. As a result, Bhutan has not experienced modern industrialization in the sense of creating a strong manufacturing base. Almost three out of four Bhutanese still earn their living in the countryside, despite the declining importance of the primary sector to the nations’ overall GDP. Bhutan managed to quadruple its GDP in the past thirty years by doing practically one thing: the average annual GDP growth rate of almost 7 percent since 1985 has been exclusively propelled by the commissioning and the construction of the hydropower plant. The building of the power plant temporarily spurred employment in the energy-related industries such as cement and ferro alloys. However, by and large, energy is not a job-creating sector, which is reflected in the still high employment rate in the agricultural sector of the economy. In addition, nearly 90 percent of firms in Bhutan are microenterprises or very small family-run businesses. The relatively
underdeveloped industrial sector in Bhutan results in a weak private sector, a small middle class, as well as a small working class. The entire economy is wholly dependent on directives from the king to introduce any social and economic changes. In fact, neither the middle class nor the workers have any incentives to challenge the public order because their economic well-being is almost entirely dependent upon the king and the royal government.

Growing resources disparities in relative of gradual modernization and sustainable development have yielded an interesting paradox within the Bhutanese society: rising inequality with trifling societal stress. How could this transpire? There are copious explanations to this unusual development. It is because, historically, Bhutan was a nation of subsistence farmers and landowners. Consequently, the Bhutanese do not suffer from starvation, as every family is entitled to a minimum amount of agricultural land, given freely in their name by the state as a kidu for their livelihood. The state provides support to build modest houses. This is a line of reasoning worth mentioning because it meant that the majority of the population’s basic needs are met, although they are poor in terms of their wealth accumulation. Together with the fact that the poor do have land and space to live in, it would be much less plausible for them to have acrimony against the king and state or to feel drawn to any populist ideas of land or wealth redistribution. Indeed, the growing rural-urban inequality is not a result of the deliberate state’s policies, but rather the harsh geographical reality that has made efforts to equalize socioeconomic development much more challenging. First of all, the state relies heavily on non-tax revenue, primarily from the sales of hydroelectricity. Direct taxes, at the beginning of the fiscal reforms in the 1980s, were virtually nonexistent and have been kept negligible to this day. This implies that as the country grows economically, the elites will not be burdened with increased taxes. The high level of government’s support for rural development is not only unwavering, but increasing on a yearly basis. In totality, the self-sufficient and land-owning nature of most Bhutanese, along with the government’s heavy focus on helping the poor, have smoothed out the otherwise potentially divisive impacts of growing inequality among the various classes in society.

Many authors have argued that capitalist economic development creates growing social pressure for democratization by fostering the emergence of a middle class, bourgeoisie, or working class that seeks access to state power. Despite several signs of improved economic conditions amongst the populace,
the Bhutanese people have neither developed a sizable middle class nor a sense of civic and political consciousness to push for political change.

As all traditional states, Bhutan has gone through two different stages in the modernization of its polity. From the establishment of the monarchy in 1907 to the 1960s, the first challenge had been to concentrate power necessary to produce changes in a weakly articulated and organized traditional society and economy. The second stage consists in expanding the power in the system to assimilate the educated and newly mobilized and politically participant groups, in order to create a modern system, which is still under way under king-initiated reforms. The Bhutanese society lacks a sizable middle class and working class, educated citizenry, and intragroup tension that would have precipitated regime disgruntlement among the public.

Lastly, Bhutan experiences least interference from its more powerful neighbors, India or China. As examined above, both powerful neighbors are more interested in maintaining a non-interfering relationship. The lack of external influence means that the existing regime could operate without pressure to change from abroad. With a citizenry generally dependent on a rigid economic system based on government employment and clientalism, reform efforts—both economic and political—are frustrated.

The Bhutanese regime is able to shape the class system through three devices in particular to create this unconventional modernization: (1) general public expenditure, (2) government employment, and (3) public policies, especially those relating to economic subsidies, health, education, and land and house kidu. “The prince’s purse and the principality’s purse are one in the same thing.” Thus, the government’s relationship with its constituents in a “rentier state” is one of a “public benefactor.” Citizens rely on government for food, shelter, education, and occupation, nearly all nitty-gritty of day-to-day life.

It is obvious from the above deliberations that Bhutanese society underwent a very narrow transformation. Out of this process, the social structure was reconstituted in a pyramidal form. At the top rested the rulers (Druk Gyalpo and the Je Khenpo, royal family members, ministers and deputy ministers, National Assembly and National Council members, and high religious and civil officials, district officers, and judges or anyone holding the title of dasho), upper bourgeoisie favored by the political regime, high-level technocrats and bureaucrats in the public sector, and the senior executives mostly under the umbrella of Druk Holding Investments, along with a collection of small business owners in urban centers. Below this, there were middle echelon bureaucrats,
technocrats, managers, petite bourgeoisie, and white-collar workers. And forming the huge base of this pyramidal structure were the farmers, the underemployed, and the jobless in rural Bhutan. The new sociopolitical actor, which emerged out of this process, is the middle stratum. It grew in strength as state-dominated capitalist development continued. The swift urban migration from rural areas was a result of modernization accelerated by authoritarian government since 1980s. This led to a change in the occupational structure of the country. If, in the 1950s, four out of four people were farmers, then by mid-1980s, only three of four remained on the farm. Some of the people who sought fortune through free education in the cities were successful and became professionals, managers, civil servants, white-collar workers, and so forth. In short, they integrated into the existing group of well-to-do urban dwellers. They held key positions in civil service and public sector, and possessed a high degree of respect from society. The middle stratum was concerned with a fair share in the management of the country’s political life. I strongly argue that the business elites and educated middle class were seeking a political space to accommodate their changing interests brought about by limited modernization. This can be the seasoned reason for King Jigme to initiate recent political reforms.

Is there any change in the balance of power? As seen from the above analysis of changing structure of Bhutanese economy, one could discern some changes in social structure. Before the 1980s, almost 80 percent were farmers and remaining 20 percent students, professionals, king and royal family members, upper bourgeoisie, and middle-class elites but after the 1980s, their ratio is almost 70 percent to 30 percent.

However, in Bhutan we see the familial model—“King as father knows best, the leader must be obeyed and the individual sacrifices for the collective good”—in the political life strongly articulated through Tsa-Wa-sum. There was a strong tendency that the power become centralized and personalized. Government was to be conducted by the example of the ruler, not by law. And loyalties were paid to those who occupied positions of authority but not the abstracted concepts nor the offices themselves. This type of political understanding entailed several patterns of behavior: (1) factionalism, (2) intolerance, and (3) patron-client. High concentration of authority meant that those in power got everything and those out of power got little. The political struggle was like a zero-sum game. The king and his inner circle remain the most powerful actors in the political and economic system. My conclusion is that the palace has coopted the process of economic liberalization to replenish its
patron-clientele network and enhance its international legitimacy, as conferred in ensuing chapters of this book. Therefore, economic liberalization might actually have a negative relationship with political reform unless the power of the palace is first curtailed.

When observing the country’s social and economic development in the past decades, it is clear that although Bhutan has gone through the narrow modernization process in the past decades, the society is not “ripe” for a regime change. Indeed, the country lacks several major components that would have made a democratic consolidation attractive to the public at large. First, the country has not undergone the conventional industrialization process based on the emergence and the acceleration of the industrial or manufacturing sector. Bhutan has been able to increase its gross output by relying solely on the commissioning and construction of its most important natural resources: water. Secondly, the wealth that is being created through the sales of hydroelectricity has over the years increased the income of the populace, but has not, surprisingly, resulted in any social unrest or tension. That is because the government has focused its efforts almost exclusively on providing for the poor—guaranteeing a sufficient piece of land, accommodation, free education and healthcare, and subsidies for farming activities. Better yet, the government is not forced to raise taxes to finance its expenditure on rural development because its major source of earning comes directly from the sales of hydroelectricity. The intragroup inequality has neither bred class struggle nor provided the public an impetus to dissent the monarchical regime. Thirdly, the overwhelmingly high share of uneducated adults in Bhutan does not give strong basis for the development of political consciousness, civic responsibilities, or the appreciation for democracy. Lastly, Bhutan experiences minimal interference from its more powerful neighbors, such as India or China. The lack of external influence means that the existing regime could operate without pressure to change from abroad. With a citizenry generally dependent on a rigid economic system based on government employment and clienteles, reform efforts, both economic and political, are frustrated. Yet what was considered appropriate and acceptable in Bhutan in the 1960s is no longer so, as the changes in the structure of Bhutanese society, particularly social and educational shifts, are not reflected in the politics or the hierarchy running the country.

As exemplified above, the Bhutanese polity has not been influenced significantly by specific historical, political, economic, social, or cultural-religious factors. None of the large ideological movements that spread through
the third world after the Second World War affected the kingdom. Bhutan escaped the concepts of nationalist political movements that led to India’s independence and spread to Nepal and Sikkim. Socialism or liberalism is irrelevant to the Bhutanese polity, at least in its present form. Political consciousness has always been very low among the general populace. The politicization process that had significant impact on large sections of the population in all other parts of South Asia has not mobilized Bhutanese crowds, except for Nepali Bhutanese in the Southern districts. That the average Bhutanese is only poorly educated and clearly has priorities that lay outside of the political sphere has been decisive in that respect. \( ^{186} \) Trade had an important role in traditional Bhutan. Yet, the country was not organized as a commercial hub. Its social and political structures were mostly inward-looking. As a result, development in Bhutan has been remarkably free from seeing economic, political, social, or cultural disruption. From the above discussion of social, economic, and political structures of Bhutan since the 1960s, we see a Bhutanese paradox of “economic prosperity but sociopolitical suffocation.”

In short, we see in Bhutan today an immensely imbalanced nation of a moderately flourishing economy with a repressive sociopolitical system. The state was remarkably strong, with an unusual degree of autonomous power to impose its will on a weak society. Today, hardly anything socially consequential was left untouched by the regulatory actions of the state, and no groups or organizations in society existed without state influence. One wonders how such a situation could last so long. The Bhutanese people appeared to be submissive and well managed. They seemed to have no strong desire to organize private interests in confrontation with the state. Why? Was it because, although being authoritarian, the state was responsive to the people’s demands and could deliver brilliantly its promise of economic development? This does appear to be the case. For now, an educated portion of the Bhutanese tended to accept king rule as long as the regime could ensure stability, security, order, and a high growth rate with government employment to benefit them.

Democratization was indeed resistible in Bhutan at the end of the 1990s as there was only an exile group of Bhutanese demanding democracy and human rights. However, inside Bhutan, by the end of the 1990s, the whole “infrastructure” of the society—economic development, class structure—had not changed and a new political culture had not begun to articulate itself, and a civil society had not risen to challenge the power of the state. Therefore, the king and his “superstructure,” namely politics, could stay the same. Even though the
change in infrastructure of the society and change in balance of power was not perceptibly noticeable in Bhutan, unlike in many Asian countries, the people from the South and East raised the demand for change in the 1950s and 1990s as a counter-reaction to government polices like serfdom and taxes in the 1950s and citizenship/census policy and religious prosecution in the 1990s, as discussed in ensuing chapters of this book.

It is arguable that the overall social and ideological bases for democracy had not been instituted in Bhutan as a consequence of changes in the factors that were intrinsic to the developmental process. The causal process in which the changes in basic socioeconomic indicators would lead to changes in the society’s structure and then to political development has not developed passably in Bhutan. The model did not robustly fit in the case of Bhutan’s democratization process, for at least now. The economic, social, and cultural changes brought about by modernization did not dramatically change the power balance in the Bhutanese society through creating new classes in support of democratic transition. It is argued that the limited structural transformations in the Bhutanese society have not brought significant changes to the country’s socioeconomic development, nor developed key components that would have enticed a change in regime. In other words, transformations of the Bhutanese society have not given rise to popular support for a regime change.

If this is the case, then what has led to a mass movement in the 1950s and 1990s in Bhutan, as well as conflicts within royal family members and ruling elites? The regime has introduced callous policies targeting particular ethnic groups occasionally to consolidate their hold on political, social, and economic system of Bhutan. Even though the development and modernization did not develop the key components to entice a change in regime, the reality is that the people mobilize themselves to protest the brutal and cold-hearted policies of a regime like taxation (East) and serfdom (South and East) in the 1950s and citizenship/census policy in 1988 to 1990 (South) or the religious persecution in the 1990s (East). The protests have often assumed the character of democratic struggle, where the people demanded a change in political system and form of government; a constitution guaranteeing basic personal and political rights; fair and free multiparty elections; political participation open to all citizens; guaranteed civil, political, sociocultural, and economic liberties; corruption-free and responsible government; independent courts of law; civil society; free media and political tolerance; and civilian control over the military. The socioeconomic factors—the growth of education, development of educated middle class, and
small business class from ruling family members as well as an influence from India and Nepal due to close sociocultural relations particularly of Lhotsampa Bhutanese—have inspired and mobilized them to protest the government policies. The protest by people is a “counter-reaction” to callous government policies. Therefore, what is occurring in Bhutan is the nascent process that has begun to alter the way both the rulers and subjects are structuring their political, economic, and social interactions. This has created an inconsistency where there is high economic growth but suffocated social and political system in Bhutan. The liberalization reforms carried out by monarchs have, on the one hand, created growth in Bhutan’s economy in recent years, yet on the other, it has neither created critical mass of the middle class or developed strong political consciousness among the mass to push for political change. As explained above, the king has pursued an unconventional modernization, which failed to engender the key components for regime change, unlike other countries on one hand and at the same time accommodate the growing educated middle class and introduce some reforms to fit its socioeconomic base: to become a little democratic, as conversed in this book. With excellent political entrepreneurship, King Jigme managed to outmaneuver the dissidents in exile, neutralizing an important actor—the educated middle class—leading the government out of the crisis unscathed. The king’s declaration of reforms was decisive in sealing the outcome of the democratic transition in Bhutan. The political will and pressure from the Bhutanese public have not yet reached critical mass—but they will. For a country with a large share of uneducated and politically docile population, one would suspect the elites to play a greater role in propelling political change. In the absence of inclusive reform, another surge of demand and peaceful expressions is only a matter of time, and the future will likely bring more dramatic results.

In conclusion, the social, economic, and political structures as conferred above are intrinsic to the modernization process in Bhutan. Unlike many other cases in the study of regime change throughout Latin America and Asia, the king’s decision to initiate reforms is not reactionary to a social, political, or economic progress. Rather, it is a carefully planned and calculated decision by the monarchy to accommodate the growing educated middle class in the political system to weed out any threat in the future. The socioeconomic structures and the political legacy of the previous authoritarian period have produced a “semi-authoritarian” regime in Bhutan, as discussed in forthcoming chapters.
Conclusion

To outsiders, Bhutan appears calm and stable. The governments friendly to the Wangchuk dynasty are keen to promote the image of a firmly entrenched and legitimate regime, as, of course, is the Bhutan royal family itself. It appears that all in the kingdom is not as stable as the image-makers would have us believe. The social and economic developments of recent years are visibly opening gaps between generations and enlarging those that already exist between economic classes. A relatively performing economy and a rising, albeit hidden, level of youth unemployment also throws up serious challenges to the regime. Adding to these concerns is the fact that the political development permitted by the absolute monarchy lags far behind the unsteady social and economic changes that are already taking place. However, whatever challenges the regime faces—and it will face interrelated socioeconomic problems of increasing seriousness, especially, in the years ahead—the ultimate viability of the monarchy should not be threatened.

The king sought to coopt dominant and educated middle classes into a new modus vivendi while maintaining controls over political participation, especially among the lower classes. King Jigme is an economic modernizer. He undertook policies that expanded the overall size of the state, developed infrastructure, and promoted economic growth. But even as the regimes presided over some changes in the role of the state and the structure of the economy, they did not subject societies to a fundamental restructuring of power relations. For the most part, the spectrum of political organization was essentially “frozen” as exile parties and organizations were limited in their activities. This conservative type of modernization left intact many of the adverse social-structural and political features that were the mainstay of the old oligarchic/dictatorial organization of politics. Thus, economic modernization did not put an end to the profoundly non-democratic features of the social and political structures.

NOTES

2. Since the Second World War, development and modernization has been synonymous with economic, social, and political change in the countries of Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the South Pacific. The dominant paradigm of development mostly based on the market has failed to promote equity; sustainability and democracy as the benefits went to the already well off and could not trickle down to smash the bedrock of poverty.
some of the older sects found themselves out of Tibet and sought fresh pastures for evangelical work. The new sect is called the Drukpa or Thunder Dragon sect. Under the pressure of the reformist Gelugpa sect, the spot at which the prayer meeting was being held. The monastery was named as "Nam Drukgor." The word Drukyul connotes the "Land of Thunder Dragon." Druk means "Dragon," which emanates from Dragon People, or the Land of the Thunder Dragon—a reference to the country’s dominant Buddhist sect.

1. See L. W. Pye, Aspects of Political Development (New Delhi: Amerind Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd., 1972), 33–45. According to Pye, development can be understood as (1) political development as the political requisite of economic development, (2) political development as the politics typical of industrial societies, (3) political development as political modernization, (4) political development as the operation of a nation-state, (5) political development as administrative and legal development, (6) political development as mass mobilization and participation, (7) political development as the building of democracy, (8) political development as stability and orderly change; (9) political development as mobilization and power, and (10) political development as one aspect of the multidimensional process of social change.


3. Bhutanese and foreign scholars rarely tread on the critical analysis of Bhutan’s social, political, and economic development, despite a rich wealth of knowledge to explore such issues. This is likely because such studies, particularly of political issues, are a taboo subject inside and outside Bhutan. As a result, scholars working on Bhutan usually practice self-censorship regarding the critical study of the country.

4. For more details, see D. Rizal and Y. Yokota, Understanding Development, Conflict and Violence: The Cases of Bhutan, Nepal, Northeast of India and Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh (New Delhi: Adroit Publishers, 2006). From three major schools (modernization development school, dependency-Marxist, and contemporary perspectives), a list of interrelated political, economic, and sociocultural problems are identified as salient for measuring development in multiethnic Bhutan. Indeed, most contemporary scholars reject the very idea of a single theory of development. This is mainly due to the fact that third-world countries, including Bhutan, is too diverse to be encompassed by a single theory of development and social change. Moreover, the process of political, sociocultural, and economic development, even in a nation, are far too complex to be explained by any single theory. However, this does not mean that the insights offered by modernization and dependency theories have not been useful. The current understanding of development draws on the strength of both schools of thoughts while recognizing their limitations.

5. The central problem with the Bhutanese arguments is that, while they draw upon the rhetoric of cultural relativism and the developmental state, they are too easily a façade behind which authoritarian leaders deny human rights and opposition. If Bhutanese society is so self-disciplined and cohesive, why has it been necessary to maintain authoritarian state structures? Bhutanese values can too easily be a tool to resist change and de-legitimize external scrutiny. Bhutanese leaders, for example, often talk defensively about the feelings of the Bhutanese people. However, the Bhutan position on human rights was interpreted by the leaders from the top down, and not by their citizens. I note that modernization in Bhutan is changing social values in a limited way and certain characteristic values are fading.

6. A Sanskrit Bhot+anta means end.

7. The names Lhomon Tsendenjong (Southern Mon sandalwood country) and Lhomon Khashi (Southern Mon country of four approaches), found in ancient Bhutanese and Tibetan chronicles, may also have credence and have been used by some Bhutanese scholars when referring to the homeland. Variations of the Sanskrit words Bhota-ant (end of Bhot, an Indian name for Tibet) or Bhu-uttan (meaning highlands) have been suggested by historians as origins of the name Bhutan, which came into common foreign use in the late nineteenth century and is used in Bhutan only in English-language official correspondence. The traditional name of the country since the seventeenth century has been Drukyul—country of the Drukpa, the Dragon People, or the Land of the Thunder Dragon—a reference to the country’s dominant Buddhist sect.

8. For more details, see D. Rizal and Y. Yokota, Understanding Development, Conflict and Violence: The Cases of Bhutan, Nepal, Northeast of India and Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh (New Delhi: Adroit Publishers, 2006). From three major schools (modernization development school, dependency-Marxist, and contemporary perspectives), a list of interrelated political, economic, and sociocultural problems are identified as salient for measuring development in multiethnic Bhutan. Indeed, most contemporary scholars reject the very idea of a single theory of development. This is mainly due to the fact that third-world countries, including Bhutan, is too diverse to be encompassed by a single theory of development and social change. Moreover, the process of political, sociocultural, and economic development, even in a nation, are far too complex to be explained by any single theory. However, this does not mean that the insights offered by modernization and dependency theories have not been useful. The current understanding of development draws on the strength of both schools of thoughts while recognizing their limitations.

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10. The Bhutanese themselves prefer to use the word “Drukyul,” which is the replacement of Lho-mon. The word Drukyul connotes the “Land of Thunder Dragon.” Druk means “Dragon,” which emanates from the name of the Drukpa school of Tibetan Buddhism. The legend states that in the twelfth century, when Tsangpa Gyalrey was preaching to his disciples at Namkhipu near Lhasa, they suddenly heard the sound of thunder in the winter sky. It was interpreted as a good omen, and it was decided to establish a monastery on the spot at which the prayer meeting was being held. The monastery was named as “Nam Drukgor.” The new sect is called the Drukpa or Thunder Dragon sect. Under the pressure of the reformist Gelugpa sect, some of the older sects found themselves out of Tibet and sought fresh pastures for evangelical work.
outside their own country. The Drukpas, a red hat sect who proceeded to Bhutan, became so successful in their missionary enterprise that the country of their adoption was soon established as the main stronghold of the Drukpa sect. Thus, the country came to be known as “Drukyul.”


15. The land area is disputed presently due to the border row with China. Lately, it has been noted that China is trying to gobble up the contested Bhutanese land and its claim is no longer restricted to the Doklam Plateau alone, but touches other strategically important neighboring areas like Charithang, Sinchulimpa, and the Dramana pasture lands. Although in 1998 Beijing entered into an agreement with Thimphu promising to maintain peace and tranquility in the border areas, it has extended road networks in Zuri and Pheeteogang ridges overlooking the Charithang Valley, thereby creating tensions. There are also reports that China has not only put forward newer claims to over 300 square kilometers of territory in Northern Bhutan, but actually took possession of 8,229 square kilometers of Bhutanese areas in 2013, reducing the total area to 38,389 from 46,500 square kilometers. Also refer to D. Rizal, “The Unknown Refugee Crisis: Expulsion of the Ethnic Lhotsampa from Bhutan,” Journal of Asian Ethnicity, 15, no. 2 (2004): 151–177; and Bhutan National Statistics Bureau, Statistical Yearbook, 29th ed. (Thimphu: National Statistics Bureau, 2011), xiv.

16. See Information Service of India, Bhutan and Sikkim (Gangtok: Political Office, Sikkim).


18. The 4260 square kilometers in Trashigang reflect the area before splitting the Dzongkhag into two manageable districts of Trashigang and Tashiyangtse.


20. For details, see Bhutan National Statistics Bureau, Bhutan at a Glance (Thimphu: Royal Government of Bhutan, 2014).

21. The country receives the monsoon rain in summer, with a relatively dry winter. About 72 percent of the land area is covered by forests of temperate and subtropical species that are a natural habitat of a diversity of flora and fauna. The steep and unstable terrain and the relatively young mountain system, however, render the country to be ecologically very fragile. Agricultural production is also severely constrained, as only around 16 percent of the land area is cultivable.

22. The variations in climate are correspondingly extreme. Southern Bhutan is generally hot and humid, while the high Himalayan Mountains in the Northern borders of Bhutan are under perpetual snow. Climate can vary considerably between valleys and within valleys depending on the altitude. Rainfall, in particular, can differ within relatively short distances due to rain shadow effects. Annual rainfall is concentrated in the monsoon season, which is mid-June to September. Rough estimates of rainfall are in the Southern border areas 3,000 to 5,000 millimeters per annum, in the Southern foothills 1,200 to 2,000 millimeters per annum, in the inner central valley 500 to 1,000 millimeters per annum, and above four thousand meters elevation less than 500 millimeters per annum.

23. The country is endowed with a river system that has an estimated potential to generate thirty thousand megawatts of hydroelectricity. The four major rivers, Amo Chhu, Wang Chhu, Punatsangchhu, and the Drangme Chhu, and their tributaries have carved fertile valleys in the central and Western parts of the country, and provide irrigation to the Southern and Eastern plains before flowing into the Brahmaputra river basin. The flora of Bhutan are exceptionally diverse as a result of a great range of altitudinal zones and varied climatic conditions, and 72 percent of the country is covered by forests of fir, mixed coniferous,
temperate, and broadleaf species. A number of rare animals can still be found since Bhutan’s flora has remained undisturbed. The exact number of species is unknown, but over 165 have been reported. Rare animals including the golden langur, takin, and blue sheep are found distributed quite widely. Tigers, leopards, snow leopards, red panda, gaur, serow, Himalayan black bears, brown bears, wild pigs, musk deer, and other types of deer are commonly found in many parts of Bhutan. The Phobjikha valley in Wangdue Dzongkhag and Bomdiling in Tashiyangtse are two of the three wintering grounds for the rare black-necked crane. A total of 26 percent of the country has been declared as nature parks and reserves, which form havens for a number of the world’s rare and endangered species.

24. In view of the census of 1970, it is now possible to state that the population of Bhutan is 1.31 million inhabitants in an area of 47,000 square kilometers, or 18,000 square miles, giving a density of 73 persons to a square mile. When Bhutan joined the United Nations in 1971, it provided a population figure of 1.2 million. Projections in that base figure now would have a population over the 1.4 million mark. In 1981, its population was stated to be 1,650,000. The Statistical Year Book of Bhutan 1989 had estimated its population at 1,375,400. In 1990, its population was estimated at 600,000. In 1997, its population was between 713,211 and 768,050. Again in 1998, it was estimated as 636,499. Today, the government has given a figure of 7,45,153.

25. Bhutan’s ethnic landscape can most conveniently be simplified into the contrast between pastoralist communities of alpine country and high passes of Northern borderland and shifting cultivators of subtropical lowlands. In between such an enormous elevation gradient, several aboriginal people are found living. Brokpas, Laps (the people of mountain passes), and Bjops (yak herders) are very important celebrated tribe of Tibetan stock in Bhutan in the North. In the South, Nepalese settlers of Indo Aryan stock are an important segment of Bhutanese society. There are some other groups inhabiting the Southern foothills like Totos, Taba, and Dramtoeps regarded as aboriginals. Doya of Lotu-Kuchu of Dorokha region is a rare community, which belongs to Kiranti language of the Tibeto-Burman branch. The central section of Bhutan is divided into historical and linguistic lines into three regions: Western, central, and Eastern region. There are marked variations from valley to valley and village to village as they are separated by high mountain passes over three thousand meters. The inhabitants of Kheng region are another important group known as Khengpas, living in thirty-five villages out of a total of ninety-one villages of the Kheng region that comes under Zhempang Dzongkhag. Khengpas have a distinct Indo-Tibetan affinity. They were in trading contacts with Assam and Bengal provinces of India in the South and Tibet in the North. The inhabitants of the six Eastern districts are Lhuntse, Monger, Trashigang, Trashiyangse, Samdrup Jongkhar, and Pemagatshel are commonly known as Sharchops or the Easterners. They are similar to those of population of Arunachal Pradesh (India), Northern Myanmar, and Northern Laos speaking a language of Tibeto-Burman group.


30. For more information, see Ethnologue Report for Bhutan. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=BT.


35. The 1993 estimate of their numbers is from the Ethnologue Report for Bhutan. http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=BT.


37. The occupation of Tibet by Chinese Communist forces in 1950 has been seen as leaving the Bhutan as the last standing bastion of an ancient cultural history. It has been reported that the whole enormous area of Bhutan, which was once the spirited domain of Tibetan culture and religion, stretching from Ladakh in the West to the borders of the Chinese provinces of Szechuan and Yunnan in the East, from the Himalayas in the South to the Mongolian steppes and the vast wastes of Northern Tibet, now only seems to survive as the one resolute and self-contained representative of a fast-disappearing civilization. It is this fragile survival of a “fast-disappearing civilization” that may help explain the Bhutanese Government’s policies, programs, and especially the adoption of a new constitution, which seem to exclude any acknowledgment of the kingdom’s diversity and any concession to many of its minorities. Yet the vulnerability of Bhutan as a political entity, the “threats” to its survival, and the reasons why the Government of Bhutan has apparently gone to extremes to exclude or at the very least discriminate against many of its own citizens only make sense in the context of a cultural, linguistic, or religious threat, and it is here that the issue of minorities and the makeup of the country’s population become matters of controversy in Bhutan today.

38. Since its introduction in the eighth century, Buddhism has shaped the nation’s history and played a vital part in the life of its people. Throughout Bhutan, from the most densely populated valleys to the most remote mountain way-stops, religious monuments and symbols bear witness to a deep and respected faith. One comes across prayer wheels, prayer flags, and the sacred Buddhist mantra like “Om Mani Padme Hung” engraved on stone slabs and rocky hillsides.

39. For discussions, see D. Snellgrove and H. Richardson, A Cultural History of Tibet (Boulder, CO: Prajna Press, 1980), 271.

40. In a country with a population of around nine hundred thousand people, as many as twenty-three different dialects and a few languages are spoken. This is attributed to the fact that in the past, Bhutanese communities settled in the valleys with limited communication. It is for the same reason that the sense of individuality and independence emerges as a strong characteristic of the people.

41. Buddhism was introduced in Bhutan in the seventh century by Guru Padma Sambhava. In the centuries that followed, Bhutan was home to many sages and saints, including the great saints-scholars like Longchen Ramjam, also known as Kuenkhen Longchen Ramjam (1308–1363). Various schools of Buddhism in Bhutan assimilated other earlier practices and beliefs. The aspirations toward enlightenment and the belief in the innate goodness of human beings are widely shared among Buddhists. Hinduism is another religion practiced particularly in Southern Bhutan. The Hindu religion as practiced by Southern Bhutanese has many common saints and divinities with Vajrayana, the school of Buddhism prevalent in Bhutan. The importance of religious institutions continues in present-day Bhutan, as signified by the strength of the monk body, which number about five thousand in Dratshangs or Rabdeys. This figure takes into account only those monks who are part of the formal monastic structure supported by the state and excludes those who are not part of the state-sponsored Dratshangs.

42. For details, see Bhutan National Statistics Bureau, Bhutan at a Glance (Thimphu: Royal Government of Bhutan, 2014).

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.


46. Lhomon literally means Southern darkness and Monyul is dark land, a reference to the Monpa
aboriginal peoples of Bhutan.

47. See R. Rahul, Modern Bhutan (Delhi: Vikas Publication, 1974).

48. Refer to B. Hasrat, The History of Bhutan (Thimphu: Education Department, 1980).


50. It is not clear whether he came to Bhutan from India or Nepal. The most popular place could be Nepal because of religiohistorical links with Tibet and Nepal. The Halasey Mahadev Temple in Eastern Nepal is another place like Tsaktang, where gurus mediated. Many Bhutanese make a pilgrimage to this holy site in Nepal.


54. Ibid, 199.

55. Ibid, 181–199.


57. He was recognized as incarnation of Pema Karpo, a key Drukpa lama, who spread the Drukpa sect in Tibet. He became the abbot of the Drukpa School at the age of twelve, replacing his grandfather. Tsang Desi, a local Tibetan ruler, supported another candidate as the reincarnation of Pema Karpo. Afterward, he was pushed out of Tibet by the Gelugpa sect headed by the Dalai Lama. He took refuge in Bhutan, and within a few years, he had established his political and religious authority. Conditions had worked favorably for him to consolidate highly decentralized political system.

58. Fort, now it functions as the center of civil administration.

59. It signifies at whose feet one submits and erstwhile theocratic head of Bhutan.

60. Chhoesid Nyi refers to religion and politics.

61. Chief Abbot of the State Monastic Body.

62. Civil Ruler of Bhutan before the establishment of hereditary monarchy.

63. Dzongpon refers to governor.

64. It refers to guest master.

65. Kalyeon denotes chief minister.

66. Governor of a region consisting of several districts.

67. State monastic body.


69. Ibid.


73. The demerits of the Zhabdrung system was vividly conveyed by Rennie: “The Deb Raja is supposed to be elected by the council of permanent minister and to be chosen from amongst the principal officers of the country; who are eligible for seats in the council. At present day, however, in practice, the Government of the country has fallen in reality into the hand of the Penlops of eastern and western Bhutan, who are usually at war with one another and the Deb, now merely the nominee of whichever of the two happens to be for the time the most powerful. Though in theory, they (the Penlops) are supposed to be nominated by
the Deb—the practice, however, being that they fight their way to power. The Deb Raja is consequently a mere puppet, who exercises no influence whatever in Government matters. Eden observes that there are generally some three or four Debs or ex-Debs in the country. The Paro Penlow nominate a Deb and places him on the throne, a few months afterward the Tongsa Penlow elect him and substitutes his own puppet. He is in turn elected by the Paro Penlow, and this perpetual struggle goes on, and has gone on without interruption for the last fifty years. That the Chhoesid system generated civil wars and commotions is apparent from the fact that during its two and a half centuries of existence in Bhutan, out of the total 54 Debs who ruled the country from 1651 to 1907 A.D., 22 of them were either assassinated, dismissed or made to resign and the country remained plunged in a state of intermittent civil war from 1865 to 1907 A.D.” The Penlops and Dzongpons had become so powerful that even they do not refer any matter to Druk Desids. It is possible that the authority wielded by the Penlops and Dzongpons in their respective jurisdictions had become so absolute that it even extended to capital punishment without any reference to the Deb Raja.


77. Refer to Indian Office Library, London, P2 2/p and s/Confidential, Letter from Political Officer in Sikkim to Government of India, No. 6(1) p33, December 21, 1933.

78. The agreement never mentions anything about military pact except trade. It appears important to British India mainly due to the fact that British traders were trying their best to extend their trading connection into China. Thus, passage through Bhutan and Tibet provided an easier and more or less safe access to China.

79. Confer with Indian Office Library, London MSS VER: P1024 External/Secret 1, Foreign and Political Department, L/P and S/5/12/2225 No. 8/4, Bhutan Affairs, subsidies etc., Translation from H.M. Bailey, April 17, 1924. The Wangchuk king owed maximum to British India to enthrone them into throne of Zhabdrung and established the system of hereditary monarchy in Bhutan. This view was explicit from the letter of first king to British India for increasing the subsidy in 1922: “If they [Government of India] are unable to accede my request for the purpose of the increase of the subsidy, I do not mind it, as it is by the kindness of the British [India] Government I have became [sic] what I am now.”

80. The British lost interest particularly after concluding the Treaty of 1910 as the classical era of imperialism (1871–1914) in Europe set contradictions. The greater European powers grouped themselves into two rival blocks. Both the blocks were aimed at preventing war “by appearing so strongly embattled with the allies that the other would not dare to launch an attack.” The history of subsequent years—the beginning of World War I, the Great Depression of the 1930s, World War II, and the beginning of decolonization process—retreated the British from their politics rather than embarking further expansionist strategy. This is the most measured raison d’être why Bhutan maintained its political independence without much social transition and structural transformation after the establishment of hereditary monarchy.

81. It is a title given to King of Bhutan just like the title of Chogyal given to rulers of Sikkim.


87. Cho in Bhutanese language implies religion.

89. There was relatively little from the central administration to do except to supervise the activities of the district-level officials. There was no Bhutan Army except a small palace guard. There were eleven Dzongs in Eastern, central, and Western Bhutan headed by Dzongpons. Southern Bhutan, which had been the administrative responsibility of Paro Penlop, was placed under the jurisdictions of the Dorji family in early 1890s. The first king appointed Kazi Ugen Dorji as Gongzimin in 1908. The close collaboration between Dorji families and Wangchuk families played a significant role in the post-1907 era of Bhutan. Dorji utilized the services of Sipchu Kaji for administration of Southern Bhutan. The highland administration was done by a number of officials under the Dzongpon, who were also a part of government service. The larger Dzongs had deputy district officers called Dzongtasp. There was a revenue officer called Nyerchin in each district to collect the rent in kind from cultivators on specified kinds.


91. India had become independent after dividing into two states. The British colonial masters had also withdrawn from Sri Lanka. The only other Himalayan state in South Asia, Nepal, had also performed given up its political isolation and after the overthrow of the Rana-archy in February 1951, the country was moving toward a responsible and accountable government along with the subsystem of constitutional monarchy. The neighboring state of Sikkim was still free and untouched by political turmoil. Tibet was taken over by China and there was a re-emergence of China and Sino-India war. There was a tremendous change throughout the world, particularly due to retreat by colonial rulers in Asia and African countries.


93. Refer to Parmanand, *The Politics of Bhutan: Retrospect and Prospect* (Delhi: Pragati Publications, 1992). He notes, “The geopolitical and geo-strategic importance of Bhutan is enhanced by the fact that it is a buffer state between two Asian giants—the People’s Republic of China and India. On this count, Bhutan’s smallness in terms of size and population becomes irrelevant.”


95. Ibid, 126.

96. Ibid.

97. The visit of Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, occasioned by the first border clash between India and China, to Bhutan at this critical juncture in September 1958 was of great significance. The other possible reasons could be the political movement by the Bhutan State Congress for modernization and change in the system to incorporate the aspiration and will of all sections of Bhutanese society, and a shift in public policy was considered essential, if the monarchy was to survive in a world that was changing rapidly. These events threw new challenges to Bhutan. The sealing of the border with Tibet consequent on the Tibetan rebellion had a series of impact on Bhutan’s economy.

98. It consists of six elected representatives of the public, two elected representatives of the clergy, and one nominated by the government.

99. It consists of 105 representatives (Chimis) directly elected by the public, 10 elected representatives of the clergy, and 35 representatives of the royal government, of whom 29 are nominated by the king and 6 are elected cabinet ministers, who serve for a term of five years.


104. Ibid, 145.


Since there are still two surviving kings, father and son, fourth King Jigme Singye is recognized as (K4) and fifth King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck as (K5) throughout this book.

In 1972, the sons of Yanki (a Tibetan mistress of the third king) had all set the stage to annihilate Tashichodzong, the seat of royal power. Over twelve trucks of weapons had traversed the Chukha check post. The Yanki faction had planned that no member of the Wangchuk dynasty would be spared. However, Yanki was in India when the conspiracy progressed. The coronation of Jigme Singye was postponed for almost two years due to fear that the conspirators would strike during the coronation function. After ensuring full security that the coronation festivity would not be mired, Jigme Singye entered the throne room. Yanki and her family have been pressed out of the country. The murder of Southern Bhutanese leaders, the first prime minister, Jigme Palden Dorji, and Zhabdrung were all predestined for securing centralized power for the Wangchuk dynasty and conservative elites. After the assassination of Palden Dorji, the Wangchuks also have threats from Dorjis. The Wangchuks have threats from Yanki and the Zhabdrung’s followers.

It has been asserted that the eldest son from the eldest queen, who was supposed to inherit the throne as per Bhutanese law, was born only after the present King Keshar (K5) was born, who is from the second queen in the line of succession.

Jetsun Pema, the present queen, was born in the year 1990 to Dhondup Gyaltsen, a commercial pilot. Dhondup’s grandfather was the governor of Trashiagang district of Bhutan. Pema isn’t exactly a commoner as her mother Sonam Chuki has an indirect relation to the royal family of Bhutan. Chuki’s father is the half brother of the queens of the Second King Jigme Wangchuck—Ashi Phuntsho Choden and Ashi Pema Dechan. Jetsun has four siblings, two brothers and two sisters, and is the second eldest amongst them all. Jetsun, as a little girl, had her early education in Bhutan till the year 1998. Then she moved to Kalimpong, West Bengal, during 1999 and 2000 for her convent education, following which she went back to Bhutan and studied there until 2005. She came back to India to complete her higher secondary education and got admitted to Lawrence School, Sanawar, in Himachal Pradesh. She then went to Regent’s College, London, for her college education, majoring in international relations. Apart from the national language of Bhutan, Dzongkha, she is fluent in Hindi and English.

See chapter 4 of this book on the royal constitution and these reasons for introducing it.


For details regarding the Southern and Eastern problem, see chapter 2 of this book.

Ibid.


The Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) disqualified the Bhutan People’s United Party as a political party after it submitted its application for registration. It said that the Bhutan People’s United Party
“does not have capacity to fulfill the national aspirations, visions and goals, in terms of its ability to run the Government and have candidates, who could be members of the cabinet and parliament. It lacks credible leadership and has only an interim president, when under the laws there have to be key office bearers democratically appointed.” “It lacks both maturity and the appropriate mix and strength in terms of its membership since more than 80 percent of the members are (school) drop-outs or have no credible academic qualifications.” Despite claiming support of more than 2,500 youths and thousands of voters, the group has only thirteen names enrolled in the Electoral Roll out of forty-two members mentioned at the time of application. The ECB also accused it of not being broad-based and cross-national since it claimed to be a party of the downtrodden. The party’s charter was said to have no clear ideology, vision, and mission, indicating the lack of leadership with capability to envision goals and objectives of the group. A stunned Bhutan People’s United Party vowed to appeal against the decision. They had several justifications. For example, the party said they would have a president that is democratically elected once it was registered. Concerning members who were school drop-outs, they pointed out that the Election Bill did not require party members to have academic qualifications or a university degree. They called themselves a party for the downtrodden because they were not led by any king’s former ministers and bureaucrats. The leaders said the ideology was more or less similar to the two other parties. Democracy was new and everyone was bound to make mistakes since everyone is new to the system. ECB “should guide and help us, not kill us straightaway.” The Bhutan People’s United Party did appeal, but ECB upheld its decision.

122. For details regarding the Southern and Eastern problem, see chapter 2 of this book.
123. See National Assembly Election Results, Election Commission of Bhutan. http://www.electionBhutan.org
124. The fifth king’s education was in schools within the country followed by high school and university in the United States and the United Kingdom. He also attended the 2005 program of the National Defence College in New Delhi, India. Furthermore, he has received honorary doctorates from the University of New Brunswick, Canada, Rangsit University, Thailand, Calcutta University, India, and most recently from Keio University, Japan.
128. The pre-monarchy era was represented by the emergence of religiopolitical leaders and petty rulers before 1907 under whom burdening taxation and associated social settings reduced incentives for acquisition of wealth. The era beginning with the establishment of monarchy in 1907 until the 1950s represents a transition period during which the burdening in-kind taxation persisted as a limited option to nation building. The third era from 1950s onward marked increasing government.
129. J. C. White, Sikkim and Bhutan: Twenty-One Years on the North East Frontier (New Delhi: Sagar Book House, 1992), 166.
132. See India Office Library, UER, 2/PCS/12/224: Collection 8: Bhutan, Letter from Col. Wier No. 16(1)-P/30, April 12, 1931.
133. Refer to India Office Library, London M.S.S. Ver. 2/P and S/Confidential: Letter from Political Officer in Sikkim to Govt. of India, No (1) P/33, December 2, 1933.

134. See Bhutan National Assembly Resolution. 1953, first session held on the fifteenth day of the twelfth month of the water snake year.

135. See Bhutan National Assembly Resolution. 1958, eleventh session held on the fourteenth day of the ninth month of the Earth Dog Year.

136. Refer to Tsering Tobgay, Prime Minister, The State of The Tsa-Wa-Sum, Third Session of The Second Parliament of Bhutan, June 19, 2014, Thimphu: Royal Government of Bhutan, 1–52. To date, 75,268 Thram holders have been given 75,327 acres as the Land Kidu by the king. If calculated in monetary terms, it amounts to Nu. 1,100 million. Refunds from excess land amounts to Nu. 72 million.

137. In the process of state modernization, Penlop and Dzongpons along with many other similar posts such as Boe, Nyerchen, Zimpom, and so forth, were reduced and replaced. Most of the former posts got replaced by formal government officials such as Thrimpon and Dzongdags, and so forth, which was necessary politically or administratively for modernization processes.

138. With the restructuring of the administrative structure, power was decentralized through the creation of district administrations run by Dzongdags. This system was later standardized after consolidating the central power and strengthening the state system. The revised taxation system has reduced the burden on the people and also the transaction of taxation changed from being in kind (grains, butter, etc.) earlier to monetary (coins and paper money was introduced). Previously, the regional and local rulers were also paid in kind for their salary. When their positions were reduced and changed, the whole taxation system was transformed and became more efficient.


140. In the economic and financial field, there is a dearth of credible empirical data. In studying the Bhutanese economy, a researcher faces serious constraints of statistics. Data for the Bhutanese economy can be obtained on a limited basis from Royal Government of Bhutan. However, from the 1980s, the World Development Report and Asian Development Bank have generated the data on the Bhutanese economy. Bhutan has successfully completed ten five-year plans and has initiated eleventh five-year plan.

141. It means royal revenue office.

142. The first five-year plan (1961–1966) of Bhutan was prepared by the Planning Commission of India with a total outlay of Nu. 175 million fully funded by the Government of India.

143. Refer to the second five-year plan (1966–1971), 1–3. With further influx of a large number of workers connected to construction activities, food supply was counter-balanced partially on account of the quota of two hundred tons of grain a month provided by the Government of India, enough to fulfill the cereal need of seven thousand workers at a time.

144. It envisaged an outlay of Nu. 355 million. The government was able to finance about 70 percent of the total outlay of Nu. 355 million, while the rest came from the Government of India.

145. For details on the political problem in the South and East of Bhutan, see chapter 2 of this book.


147. The highest proportion of migrants (31.5 percent) migrated for family reasons. This was followed by 17 percent for employment, 15 percent for education and training, 11 percent due to marriage, 10 percent for work transfer, 3.4 percent for resettlement, 7 percent for living with relatives, and the remaining 7 percent for other unspecified reasons.

148. The 2014 Human Development Report presents the 2014 Human Development Index (values and ranks) for 187 countries and United Nations–recognized territories, along with the inequality-adjusted Human Development Index for 145 countries, the Gender Development Index for 148 countries, the Gender Inequality Index for 149 countries, and the Multidimensional Poverty Index for 91 countries. The United Nations Development Programmes’s Human Development Index is a composite index measuring average achievement in three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. A long and healthy life is measured by life expectancy, while access to
knowledge is measured by mean years of schooling for the adult population, which is the average number of years of education received in a lifetime by people aged twenty-five years and older. Standard of living is measured by gross national income per capita, using purchasing power parity rates.


149. Bhutan’s rapid economic growth in the past two decades has been driven by large investments in the hydropower sector. In 2013, it exported Nu. 13 billion worth of electrical power. The Chukha power tariff has been revised from Nu. 2 to Nu. 2.25 per unit. At present, it produces 1,480 MW of hydropower. Three hydropower projects with total capacity of 2,940 MW are currently being constructed. Of this, the 1,020 MW Punatsangchhu II and the 720 MW Mangdechhu Project is on track. The 1,200 MW Punatsangchhu I Project had been delayed due to geological conditions. This has now been rectified, and the project is back on track and scheduled for completion in 2018.


151. Refer to Heritage Foundation Index for 2014. http://www.heritage.org/index/country/bhutan (accessed January 2015). Bhutan’s score has increased 1.7 points from the previous year, primarily due to improved scores in government spending and freedom from corruption. Bhutan is ranked twenty-fourth out of forty-two countries in the Asia-Pacific region, and its overall score is below the global and regional averages. Although Bhutan has taken steps to modernize its economic structure and reduce poverty, only two of the ten economic freedoms—trade freedom and freedom from corruption—have recorded score improvements.


160. The first visit of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to Paro Bhutan in 1958 was the initiation of
a “special relationship” between the two countries. Looking back over the decades since then, it is the expansion of Indian assistance in every field of Bhutan’s development that has facilitated Bhutan’s socioeconomic growth. Among all other donors today, India continues to provide the largest economic assistance to Bhutan.


162. Under this treaty, India is a ngultrum payment area for Bhutan, and the transactions with Indian rupees is pegged on a one-to-one basis. The Indian rupee is legal tender in Bhutan, while Bhutanese ngultrum is informally transacted freely in the bordering towns. This transaction is mostly confined in the immediate border areas within a maximum thirty to forty kilometer lateral distance, validated basically by small businesspeople, traders, and others involved in transactions with their Bhutanese counterparts.

163. See Government of India Ministry of Foreign affairs. It has financed 1961–1966 (first plan) 10.72 cores (100 percent); 1966–1971 (second plan) 10.72 cores (100 percent); 1971–1976 (third plan) 42.66 cores (90 percent) of total outlay of 47.52 cores; 1976–1981 (fourth plan) 85.30 cores (77 percent) of total outlay of 110.62 cores; 1981–1987 (fifth plan) 134.00 cores (30.2 percent) of total outlay of 444.05 cores; 1987–1992 (sixth plan) 400 cores (42.1 percent) of total outlay of 950 cores; 1992–1997 (seventh plan) 750.00 cores (31.9 percent) of the total outlay of 2350 cores; 1997–2002 (eighth plan) 1050.00 cores (26 percent) of the total outlay of 4,000 cores; 2002–2008 (ninth plan) 2610.14 cores (29.33 percent) of total outlay of 8,900 cores; 2008–2013 (tenth plan) 3,400 cores (23 percent) of the total outlay of 14,900 cores; and 2013–2018 (eleventh plan) 4,500 cores (21 percent) of the total outlay of 21,300 cores.

164. Some of the major projects in Bhutan undertaken with Indian assistance in the past include 1020 MW Tala Hydroelectric Project, 336 MW Chukha Hydroelectric Project, 60 MW Kurichhu Hydroelectric Project, Penden Cement Plant, Paro Airport, Bhutan Broadcasting Station, major highways, electricity transmission and distribution systems, Indo-Bhutan microwave links, exploration of mineral resources, and surveying and mapping.

165. Sixteen exit/entry points in India identified in the Protocol for Bhutan’s third country trade are Jaigaon, Chamurchi, Ulta Pani, Hathisar (Gelephu), Darranga, Kolkata, Haldia, Dhubri, Raxaul, Panitanki, Changrabandh, Phulbari, Dawki, New Delhi, Chennai, and Mumbai. Of these, Kolkata, Haldia, Mumbai, and Chennai are the designated seaports; Dhubri is the riverine route; New Delhi, Chennai, Mumbai, and Kolkata are the air routes; and Raxaul is the rail route. The others are the designated road routes.


178. Bhutan’s geopolitical importance as a nation located between emerging powers China and India has a heavy influence in its foreign policies. The treaty with India, its high dependence on India for economic survival, and its landlocked geographical position all pose obstacles to establishing independent foreign relations. Even trade and economic contacts between the two countries are very small, and their common border remains closed.

179. During Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s visit to Beijing, China and India signed a memorandum of understanding on expanding border trade. According to this memorandum of understanding, both countries agreed to open trading posts on the Sikkim Tibet border through the Nathu-la Pass.


181. There are records of Chinese interventions in Bhutan in 1830, 1876, 1885, 1889, and 1905. In February 1910, the Manchu government of China laid claim to Bhutan along with Nepal and Sikkim. Direct contacts between the two countries were also recorded under the Guomindang regime in 1940, 1943, and 1947.

182. For details on Tibetan refugees and their involvement in Bhutan politics, see chapter 2 of this book.

183. This is conversed in details in chapter 7 of this book.


187. One area of potential social, and perhaps political, liability is the combination of a high growth of education and high unemployment as well as large diaspora in the Western world. A growing number of students sent abroad for higher education—thus qualifying for the top positions in the bureaucracy—come from the new elite families, who were first exposed to foreign socialization. The social and cultural change during this decade has strongly affected Bhutanese society and has increased civic awareness. The rising level of education among a growing and youthful population—currently 70 percent of citizens are under the age of twenty-nine—along with globalization and social networking have contributed to the emergence of new social forces.
Chapter Two

A Perspective on the Wind of Political Dissents, Democratic Struggles, and Mobilizing Resistance to the Authoritarian Royal Regime

The demand for democracy and human rights is not spanking new in Bhutanese chronicles. It has been contemplated in the previous chapter that the development has brought some changes to the country’s socioeconomic environment, but it has not developed key components that would be conventional to entice a change in regime. Bhutan is an incalculably imbalanced nation of a relatively thriving economy with a repressive sociopolitical system. This connotes that modernization and development could not fundamentally alter the socioeconomic structures to create a stipulation ripe for regime change. Despite the unconventional modernization and development, the reality is that Bhutanese people mobilized themselves to protest the brutal policies of regime like taxation and serfdom (South and East) in the 1950s and citizenship/census policy in 1988 to 1990 (South) or the religious persecution in the 1990s (East). The protests have often assumed the disposition of democratic struggle, where the people demanded a change in political system and form of government, including a constitution guaranteeing basic personal and political rights; fair and free multiparty elections; political participation open to all citizens; guaranteed civil, political, sociocultural, and economic liberties; independent courts of law; civil society; free media and political tolerance; and civilian control over the military. Therefore, what is taking place in Bhutan is the reform process that has begun to alter fundamentally the way both the rulers and subjects are structuring their political, economic, and social interactions. This presages that democratic protests are not a recent phenomenon in Bhutan except to those few who have heard about Bhutan to be unspoiled, exotic, and the world’s only Buddhist Shangri-La that is hidden somewhere in the Himalayas.\(^1\) Even today, very limited social scientific research regarding Bhutan’s political system has been
carried out. Most information comes from those who are interested in Mahayana Buddhism, are often loaded with personal biases, and are powerfully swayed by the royal palace and its puppet governments. The fact that Bhutan is a country of multiethnic, multireligious, and multilingual units with an authoritarianism political system ruled absolutely by a king largely remains unexplored. Yet the mystery of Bhutan as a peaceful dragon is vigorously sought to cover its faction-ridden history. It is commiserate that the democratic world is missing the history of political dissents and democratic struggles of the Bhutanese people.

The opposition to the regime began almost immediately following the independence of India in 1947. Political conflicts and mass demonstrations have erupted many times since the monarchy replaced the Zhabdrung highly decentralized democratic government. Although any historical narrative could be said to be a “particular bundle of silences,” I am interested here in the actual process by which histories and silences are both produced and unproduced, especially in connection with political projects of the nation-state in a country like Bhutan. In order to pursue this abstract line, I take Bhutan’s case as not only to illustrate it but to raise the claim that goes beyond this meandering issue.

The chapter analyzes democratic protests and power struggles in Bhutan. It provides a historical narrative of Bhutan through the examination of the protests in Bhutan history: 1950s, 1990s, and today. It also brings into the limelight the power struggles, conspiracies, and conflicts between Zhabdrung and kings, Dorji and Wangchuck family, Yangki and Wangchuk family, and Yab Ugyen/queens and members of Wangchuk family. By considering each facet as a link to the next, the historical similarities of each protest and conflict is obvious. One constant has been the presence of dissent, conducting similar opposition’s activities in each generation of anti-state protests in Bhutanese history.

Table 2.1 provides a bird’s-eye view of regime typology, power struggles, and conflicts in Bhutan since the 1500s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regime Typology</th>
<th>Zhabdrung/Kings</th>
<th>Democratic Struggles/Power Conflicts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unifier regime during the pre-monarchy era (1594–1907)</td>
<td>Zhabdrung</td>
<td>Numerous power struggles and conflicts in highly decentralized and fragmented politics between Deb Raja and Dharma Raja.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monarchy-authoritarian regime (1907–1926)</td>
<td>King</td>
<td>Mind reincarnation of Zhabdrung: Jigme Dorji and king The Paro Penlop, Dawa Paljor, and king The powerful noble family of Byaker from Bumthang and king</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monarchy-bureaucratic–authoritarian regime (1926–)</td>
<td>King</td>
<td>Zhabdrung Jigme Tenzin and king Jai Gorkha movement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL DISSENT

Dissent is a broad term covering a variety of political behaviors. Dissent consists of the objectives and behavior of opposition, which involves challenges to the existing order. Citizens engage in dissenting behavior for a variety of reasons involving both the nature of the cause and the nature of the government. Dissent springs from authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governments refusing to allow more than token opposition to its policies and practices like one we observe in Bhutan today. Extra parliamentary parties, for example, are likely to be dissenters in almost any society. Dissenters may wish to change policy, to change leaders, or to change the existing political order. Dissenters may regard the existing order as worth saving through extreme reform, or they may regard the existing order as corrosive or corrupted that only a new political order satisfies them. Most political dissenters air their actions toward some desired outcome, but other dissenters may wish only to dissent, viewing any existing order as wrong.4

Most campaigns of dissent do not lend themselves to easy categorization, and most involve elements of all forms. Based on this assertion of political dissent, the section below delves into the nature of political dissents and struggles in Bhutan bracketed together under the following headings: “Power Struggles between Zhabdrungs and Kings,” “Democratic and Human Rights Struggles,” and “The Other Wind of Political Discontents, Dissents, and Royal Smokescreen.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Regime</th>
<th>King</th>
<th>Overview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Monarchy-liberal–conservative regime (1952–1972)</td>
<td>King</td>
<td>Sharchop rebellion, Lhotshampa rebellion, Power struggle between Dorji family, conservative elites, and king, Political conspiracy and power struggle between Yanki family and king/Wangchuk family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s personal tabulation.
POWER STRUGGLES BETWEEN ZHABDRUNG AND KINGS

The first Zhabdrung arrived in Bhutan from Ralung in Tibet and founded Bhutan as it is now, and initiated a centralized administration process. He instituted the “Choe-Sid System” or the dual system of governance, where the Je Khenpo was in charge of religious matters as the head of the Drukpa Kargyupa sect of Mahayana Buddhism, while the Desid was in charge of the political affairs of the state.6

After the passing away of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, no reincarnation was found for seventy years. His KuTrul (body reincarnate), however, was born in Sikkim. Since Bhutan and Sikkim were not on friendly terms, the Central Government of Bhutan stopped recognizing the KuTruls thereafter. Zhabdrung’s ThugTrul (mind reincarnate), Nawang Drakpa, was then born in Danang, Tibet. The central government officially recognized him and established and enthroned him as the rightful heir to the first Zhabdrung’s throne. At the same time, the SungTrul (speech reincarnate) of the Zhabdrung was also officially recognized. The Zhabdrung’s ThugTrul (mind reincarnate) was revered as the secular and spiritual head of the government, above the Desid and the Je Khenpo. Table 2.2 draws attention to the Zhabdrung and his mind, speech, and body reincarnations.

Table 2.2. Zhabdrung and His Mind, Speech, and Body Reincarnations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zhabdrung</th>
<th>Born/Where</th>
<th>Died on</th>
<th>Ruled</th>
<th>Natural Death/Killed/Murdered/Poisoned/Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal</td>
<td>1594 (Tibet)</td>
<td>1651</td>
<td>1594–1651</td>
<td>Natural death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhabdrung mind reincarnations or ThugTruls (Mi)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngwang Drakpa</td>
<td>1721 (Danang, Tibet)</td>
<td>1761</td>
<td>1724–1761</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chokyi Gyaltschen</td>
<td>1762</td>
<td>1788</td>
<td>1762–1788</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jigme Dragpa</td>
<td>1791</td>
<td>1830</td>
<td>1791–1830</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jigme Norbu</td>
<td>1831</td>
<td>1861</td>
<td>1831–1861</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jigme Chogyal</td>
<td>1862</td>
<td>1904</td>
<td>1862–1904</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jigme Dorje</td>
<td>1905 (Shar Dirang, Bomdala, Tawang district of)</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>1905–1931</td>
<td>The seventh incarnation was ostensibly assassinated under the order of the second king, Jigme Dorji.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Birth Year</td>
<td>Death Year</td>
<td>Reign</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jigme Tenzin Chogay</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>1939–1953</td>
<td>The eighth incarnation was not accorded recognition and allegedly assassinated under the instruction of the third king, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jigme Nawang Namgyal</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1955–2003</td>
<td>The ninth mind incarnate was not accorded recognition. He was taken to India by the Indian political officer. There is a hearsay story about him being fed poison at Mal Bazaar, West Bengal, India, by offering food by Bhutanese impostors (women) near the Bhutan’s border while he was on his religious mission. On April 3, 2003, he died a mysterious death at Vellore Hospital in Southern India while undergoing treatment. The postmortem report of Vellore Hospital revealed that he died due to food poisoning. Such a crude method of eliminating opposition to the throne is not uncommon in Bhutanese history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pema Namgyal</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>February 2003–present</td>
<td>The tenth mind incarnation was discovered and recognized by the seventeenth Karmapa in January 2004. The boy was officially consecrated and ushered into the Kagyu institution at the age of fourteen months at Bodh Gaya, India. Devotees and followers of the Zhabdrung rejoiced and celebrated in hush for fear of sabotage by the agents from Bhutan. Fearing persecution by the regime, the parents could not return to Bhutan, where the child’s father worked as a school teacher. All of a sudden, on October 15, 2005, the government used its astute diplomacy and lured the incarnate child to Bhutan under the pretext of completing formal official procedures for recognition of the reincarnation. The Zhabdrung child was promised to be returned to Bodh Gaya by October 23, 2005. When the child reached the capital, Thimphu, he was treated like any other ordinary monk and certification of his authenticity issued by the seventeenth Karmapa was treated as invalid. People involved in helping to pave the way for the search of the child’s birth as the Zhabdrung incarnation was arrested. A Bhutanese monk believed to be influenced by Dharma protector deities had prophesied the Zhabdrung incarnation. He was arrested and punished for showing the way toward the child for recognition. The parents were brought under strict surveillance and the working father was transferred to Tsirang, where they live under police surveillance today.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choglay Namgyal</td>
<td>1708</td>
<td>1734</td>
<td>1708–1734</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.2. Continued**
Occasionally, Zhabdrung also occupied the post of the Je Khenpo and the Desid, when suitable successors were not nominated or elected. The Sungtrul was also revered and accorded the same respect as that of the ThugTrul, and also provided benefits, except the Zhabdrung’s throne. Time and again, it is known that the institution of the Zhabdrung rule ended with the establishment of the dynastic rule in 1907. However, Jigme Dorji, born in Tawang region, came to be identified with the last official incarnation of the Zhabdrung. F. M. Bailey, the political officer in Sikkim, documented the following in his confidential letter to the Government of India on the eve of the installation of the second king:

On the 13th [March, 1927], we paid a call on His Highness and also on Zhabdrung Rimpoche. . . . His present incarnation is [twenty-two] years old, the same age of the Maharaja. He was born in a village near Tawang in Tibet. He was shy and evidently unaccustomed to see strangers. On the 14th March at day break His Highness accompanied by the Dharma Raja went to the tomb of the first Dharma Raja. . . . In the centre the Dharma Raja took his seat and on his left two high Lamas. . . . We then took, leave from the Dharma Raja.9

The British Government perceived that the significance of the Zhabdrung had not suffered by the delay in reincarnation. It appears that this new Zhabdrung was an ambitious man, who was all set for staking his claim for his lost glory. The Bhutan Agent informs F. M. Bailey on October 2, 1931, that the main grievances of the Zhabdrung were having “no power whatsoever and any large

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Birth Year</th>
<th>Death Year</th>
<th>Reign</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shakya Tenzin</td>
<td>1735</td>
<td>1780</td>
<td>1735–1780</td>
<td>Not recognized and imprisoned for life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeshe Gyaltshen</td>
<td>1781</td>
<td>1830</td>
<td>1781–1830</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jigme Dorje</td>
<td>1831</td>
<td>1850</td>
<td>1831–1850</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeshe Ngedup</td>
<td>1851</td>
<td>1917</td>
<td>1851–1917</td>
<td>The fifth speech incarnation was denounced by the central cabinet during the reign of the first king and declared condemnation of future incarnates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jigme Tenzin</td>
<td>1919</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>1919–1949</td>
<td>Not accorded recognition. The sixth speech incarnation was not accepted for recognition, when it appeared from the family of the living seventh mind incarnate. The latter was allegedly assassinated in 1931 during the reign of the second king.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuenga Gyaltshen</td>
<td>1689 (Sikkim)</td>
<td>1713</td>
<td>1689–1713</td>
<td>Not recognized and poisoned to death</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

tract of lands in Bhutan to call his own.” Within Bhutan, however, the vestiges of diarchic state in the person of Thugtrul Jigme Dorje posed an unfortunate challenge to the consolidation of monarchy’s state power. Charles Bell mentions that:

Capt. Kenedey and myself visited the Talo monastery, seat of the Dharmaraja. I hear that the new Dharma raja, at present aged six years, will shortly be conducted to Bhutan. It appears that Jigme Dorji was conducted to Bhutan around 1920 along with his ambitious mother, brother and followers. The Shabdrung’s mother appeared to be unhappy about the limited role of the Zhabdrung in the administration of the country.  

Jigme Dorje’s mother demanded compensation from the king in one of the audiences she was granted in Bumthang on their way back from a pilgrimage to Lhasa, Tibet. Although it was unprecedented for the king to pay compensation, he granted them two thousand silver coins. Half of them were later found to be worn out, and Sonam Tshering, Thugtrul Jigme Dorje’s brother-in-law, had the nerve to send them back, asking the king for good ones. The act of sending back the worn out silver coins offended the king.

It is also believed that Sonam Tshering had deputed Thugtrul Jigme Dorje’s cousin Chokyi Gyaltshen to India to seek Mahatma Gandhi’s support to restore the powers enjoyed by reincarnations of Zhabdrung Rinpoche. It has been reported that Mahatma Gandhi sent them back to convey to Thugtrul Jigme Dorje that he would pray for him. A news report about the meeting obtained by Gongzim Sonam Tobgye was submitted to the king. It was rumored that Thugtrul Jigme Dorje had planned to leave for China by way of India, sending his baggage in advance. King Jigme Wangchuck and Paro Penlop sent troops to arrest Thugtrul Jigme Dorje’s relatives and besiege Talo Dzong. They arrived on October 29, 1931. The monastic community based in Punakha wrote a petition to the king to spare him. They wrote that he would be invited to live amongst them. However, the powerful Yangbi Lopen Samten Gyatsho, who was appointed by the king, had the petition changed to say that the monastic community had no say in the matter. Samten Gyatsho walked away from the meeting and therefore sealed the fate of the Shabdrung’s life in 1931 in Talo Dzong. The king’s plot became obvious, as Samten Jamtsho later became the Je Khenpo as a favor for his role in implicating the Zhabdrung.

It has been alleged that King Jigme Wangchuck ordered the assassination of Thugtrul Jigme Dorje. Aris note: “Orders from Kingarapten, the king’s winter court, finally reached the leaders waiting in Talo, to kill Zhabdrung.” Col. Weir visited Bhutan in April 1931 to confer the insignia of the K.C.I.E. to the
Maharaja and “was not able to see the incarnation of the Zhabdrung Rinpoche . . . [who] was in meditation in a hill-top monastery some [six] miles away from Punakha.” The presence of the Zhabdrung during the ceremony of insignia presentation had not been recorded.

With his assassination, the last possible domestic threat to the monarchical state was swept away. Sungtrul Jigme Tenzin, born in 1919, was twelve years old then. He was born to Thugtrul Jigme Dorje’s sister Azhi Dorji Om. Due to the prevailing situation and fear, the Sungtrul and his family fled to Kalimpong, India. They stayed in Pedung for more than twenty years. The Sungtrul befriended and developed a special rapport with Gongzim Sonam Tobgay Dorji, the then Bhutan representative in India. He spent a lot of time with his family in India and returned to Bhutan in 1949 with them. It was on this return trip that he passed away at age of thirty at Taktsi Lhakhang in Trongsa. Indeed, his death signifies that the line of speech reincarnations of Zhabdrung Rinpoche ended.

The eighth Zhabdrung Jigme Tenzin Chojay was born in 1939 in Manla, Tashigang. In the first official reference about him, Thugtrul Jigme Tenzin appears in the resolutions of the first session of the National Assembly in 1953. Since that year was an inauspicious one, King Jigmi Dorji Wangchuck had commanded that matters concerning the reincarnation of Zhabdrung Rinpoche be taken up in the second session. However, some members expressed concern that “troublemakers from abroad in the garb of pilgrims might approach the Zhabdrung and attempt to influence him politically.” Since Tashigang was geographically far away from Capital Thimphu, they proposed that he be kept by the state monastic community in Punakha. They also suggested that his mother could reside at Talo. This was the same proposal that the monastic community wanted to submit to King Jigme Wangchuck concerning Thugtrul Jigme Dorje. He was received by Tashigang Dzongpon Thinely Tobgye (Dopola) and taken to Yonphula Gonpa to receive teachings from the accomplished master Moenlam Rabzang. But he too did not live long, and his death is still a mystery.

The ninth Zhabdrung Jigme Ngawang Namgyal was born from the sister of the eighth Zhabdrung Jigme Tendzin Chogay at Manla, Tashigang, in 1955. The villagers saw auspicious signs like the unique rainbow during his birth—birth signs similar to that when his predecessor was born. His brother, a lama, Jangchub Palsang, feared that he would face a fate similar to the earlier reincarnates. So he took the child when he was four years old to Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, India. He then handed the child Zhabdrung to the Indian political officer based at Bomdeling, who in turn handed him over to Nari
Rustomji, the political officer of Assam based in Shillong, Meghalaya. Rustomji brought him to New Delhi and presented him to the Government of India. He was placed under the protection of the Indian Government. He was kept at Rewalsar in Himachal Pradesh. He received Buddhist teachings and was also tutored in English, Tibetan, and Hindi.\(^{15}\)

Possibly, this was the last formal and official stand on the issue of the incarnation of the Zhabdrung. Nari Rustomji, the advisor to the third king in the 1960s and an insider of the Bhutanese affairs, provided the vivid picture of the last incarnation of the Zhabdrung in his book *Bhutan: The Dragon Kingdom in Crisis*.\(^{16}\) The latest claimed incarnation of the Zhabdrung was reported to have appeared in the Tawang region in 1960s. Rustomji tells us:

Prime Minister Jigmie’s most anxious concern during the Chinese aggression of 1962 (on India) had been that latest reputed incarnation, a little boy about six, residing under the watchful and protective guardianship of a venerable Lama, Gompaste Rimpoche, in Tawang area of NEFA (Arunchal Pradesh) should not be abducted by the Chinese and set up as their puppet . . . we succeeded happily in locating the Gompaste together with his precious charge and bringing them both down to stay with us in the safe environs of Shillong. The young incarnation was later taken for studies to a Tibetan settlement in Dharmasala, presided over by the Dalai Lama. The maneuverings in certain orthodox quarters to restore him to his traditional dignity in Bhutan are, needless to say, not given official encouragement.\(^{17}\)

In 1985, the ninth Zhabdrung visited Samdrup Jongkhar (Eastern Bhutan) along with his sister. Even though every Bhutanese knows that the Zhabdrung is banned from entering Bhutan, his disciples clandestinely sheltered him in their house while he gave audience and blessings to thousands of devotees. Zhabdrung is warned of the danger to his life from the royal government, particularly considering that the royal government had a hand in the fate of the previous Zhabdrungs. The Royal Bhutan Army and police personnel, led by Major Lafu of the Royal Bhutan Army and Captain Kipchu of the Royal Bhutan Police, arrived at Samdrup Jongkhar to arrest Zhabdrung. However, knowing the threat to his life, he left Samdrup Jongkhar in advance due to security reasons. The Dzongda, Thrimpon,\(^{18}\) senior police officials, businesspersons, and other people who had been to see the Shabdrung were taken to Thimphu and kept under house arrest for fifteen days. They were later released on the stern condition that this incident was not to be repeated and made public.

The ninth Zhabdrung Jigme Ngawang Namgyal escaped the fate of his predecessors\(^{19}\) when he was whisked away from Bhutan at a tender age and placed under the protection of India. The Bhutanese regime considers that the Zhabdrung is a serious threat to them because he is a source of both religious
and political authority and legitimacy, and is highly revered by all Bhutanese. The institution of Zhabdrung is not defunct. Sinha notes: “The people of Pedong, Kalimpong [West Bengal, India], whose ancestry is from Bhutan, and were devoted to the Drukpa Kagyurpa sect, offered the Zhabdrung land to build a monastery at Pedong, Kalimpong.” In 2000, he came to head Sanchen Dorje Gompa at Pedong, one of the oldest monasteries in the region. The Zhabdrung established the Drukpa Kagyurpa Institute at Pedong and Bodh Gaya. Both monasteries bustled with activities, with the Drukpa Kagyurpa traditions there contending the Central Monastic Body at Punakha and Thimphu in Bhutan. Thousands of Bhutanese came to Pedong from Bhutan daily to receive Rinpoche’s blessings. Controversy has always put the Zhabdrung Rinpoche in a dilemma. On November 13, 2002, the *Kathmandu Post* reported an interview of the Zhabdrung where he stated that:

The refugees [Bhutanese] are not treated as human beings. They must be given due respects. Bhutan has done no justice to them. It should be practical. Mere talks cannot resolve the refugee problem. The people of Bhutan feel suppressed socially and politically. They feel politically insecure. Bhutan [situation] is dangerous. You cannot speak about the system. It is worse than terror, so it is extremely dangerous.

Sinha note: “The Zhabdrung mentioned in this piece was murdered after his statement supporting the cause of exiled Bhutanese.” His political statement of despotic rule in Bhutan and candid moral support to Bhutanese refugees in exile and to head Sanchen Dorje Gompa at Pedong, through which he could mobilize both his supporters inside and outside the country, may have insinuated a robust threat to monarchy in Bhutan. This may be the impending reason for his mystifying death. There is a hearsay story about being fed poison by a Bhutan government agent near Bhutan’s border while he was on his religious mission in 2003. On April 3, 2003, he died a mysterious death at Vellore Hospital in Southern India, while undergoing treatment. The postmortem report of Vellore Hospital revealed that he died due to food poisoning.

As a traditional-religious society, the Bhutanese did not appear to be reconciled to the lapse of the institution of the Zhabdrung. Consequently, the number of reincarnations was encouraged to be identified. The tenth Zhabdrung Pema Namgyal Rinpoche was secretly transferred to Bodh Gaya in December 2004 because of a perceived threat to his life, allegedly from vested political interests in Bhutan. It is thought that as a temporal leader, the Rinpoche would exercise great influence on citizens of Bhutan after many years of exile. Sources have maintained that the Bhutan Government now views Zhabdrung Rinpoche as a
threat to their authority. In December 2004, the reincarnated tenth Zhabdrung Pema Namgyal was declared at Bodh Gaya, Bihar, India. He was recognized on the basis of Choechong Tseumara’s vision and the guidance and recognition of the XVII Karmapa Rinpoche. Before this declaration, Khenpo Tshoki Dorji had repeatedly approached the XVII Karmapa Rinpoche, Urgen Thinley, himself a claimant to the title of Karmapa. Thinley has the approval of His Holiness Dalai Lama as the Karmapa despite His Holiness repeatedly saying that the time wasn’t right yet. In the end, the XVII Karmapa Rinpoche relented. The Zhabdrung’s Trulku was one year and four months old then. It appears Rinpoche has emanated two months before he passed away on the April 5, 2003. Such emanations are possible as per Buddhist traditions. Rinpoche was taken to Pedong, Kalimpong.

In October 2005, the Royal Bhutanese Government invited the tenth Zhabdrung to face a “reincarnation committee.” The innocent Khenpo Tshoki Dorji and Sonam Dorji accepted the invitation. The extending of invitation by the royal government itself gives proof that the child is truly the Trulku of the ninth Zhabdrung, whatever the outcome. The Rinpoche and his family were kept in a secret location, totally cut off from interaction with the people.

The royal government’s mouthpiece, the Kuensel, reported on November 23, 2005, that the reincarnation committee had discovered the claimant as a fake. However, instead of letting the child free, the royal government placed him and his family under heavy security surveillance. The ban on interaction with the public was strictly enforced. In early 2014, this author learned from reliable sources inside Bhutan that the current Zhabdrung Pema Namgyel has been held under house arrest in Bhutan along with his parents since 2005 after being invited to Bhutan from his home in India. It has been claimed that two more reincarnates of the ninth Zhabdrung were born in Bhutan. It now appears that the Zhabdrung Rinpoche is emanating in all forms of Ku, Sung, and Thug (body, mind, and speech). The Buddhist scholars termed this as auspicious showing that time has arrived for them to fulfill their prophecies.

The first Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal was the founder of the nation. The people of Bhutan have immense reverence to each successive Trulkus of the Zhabdrung. The myth of Shangri-la is stripped away to reveal its dark shadow: an underworld of black magic, violence, and political assassinations. The Zhabdrung is the most important Trulku lineage in Bhutan, similar to the Dalai Lama lineage of Tibet. The lineage passes through the founder of the country, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, a high Drukpa Kagyu lama, who was the unifier
of Bhutan as a nation-state. The Wangchuck kings had hoped that after their 1907 ascendancy to hereditary kinship, the Zhabdrung system of reincarnation, which began with Ngawang Rinpoche, would peter out. However, incarnations do not follow monarch diktat. Most inconveniently, they continued to appear and have to be dealt with poisonings, pushing off rooftops, and strangulations. Successive kings ensured these incarnations made quick exits, which is why the Zhabdrung has taken to being reincarnated farther and farther East, away from the power valleys of Western Bhutan, where the Wangchuk kings callously exterminate the reincarnates of Zhabdrung. Late American scholar Leo E. Rose, in his book *The Politics of Bhutan*, writes that the existence of Zhabdrung claimants have been “a matter of continuing concern for the Bhutanese authorities” because “the reincarnation principle is still deeply ingrained” among the public.26

To tightly control the process of enthronement of any reincarnated Zhabdrung and lamas, the Bhutan Government has introduced a law to suit their interests and to remove any threat from the reincarnation of Zhabdrung. The National Assembly of Bhutan resolved that the formal ngedzin (recognition) of trulkus and lamas born in Bhutan would be conducted according to Bhutanese traditions and the rules of procedure framed by the committee, which was established in accordance with the resolution of the eighty-third session of the National Assembly. The Assembly also resolved that trulkus and lamas living outside Bhutan would have to follow the resolution of the thirtieth session of the Assembly, held in 1969, which said that a trulku or lama could choose to renounce Bhutanese citizenship and live in other countries. On the basis that it was of vital importance to establish clear and strict procedures for the recognition of Bhutanese and other trulkus born in Bhutan, the committee drew up a fourteen-point list of rules of procedure for the ngedzin of trulkus and lamas in September 2005. This included the traditional practice of recognition by the trulku of the biographical sketch and details of his past life. The Kalyon27 reported that Khenpo Tshoki Dorji acknowledged his mistake. Given the experience of the committee, the Kalyon submitted three recommendations made by the committee: the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs should strictly follow all the established laws, rules, and procedures; it should discourage the support of false claimants within or outside the country; and the ministry should also ask people with ulterior motives not to interfere in Bhutan’s internal matters.28

Then Minister for Home and Cultural Affairs Jigmi Thinley notes that:
there were [sixty-four] officially recognized trulkus in Bhutan: five in Bumthang, five in Trongsa, seven in Thimphu, six in Punakha, one in Pemagatshel, three in Wangduephodrang, nine in Lhuentse, three in Trashigang, one in Sarpang, one in Mongar, four in Samdrup Jongkhar, one in Dagana, eight in Trashiyangtse, and six in Paro. He said that many of them were not residing in Bhutan since they were reincarnations of Tibetan lams, adding that the detailed report would be submitted to the committee. He added that Bhutan was a Buddhist country where people had full faith in the Buddha Dharma. If people attempted to take young trulkus away from their villages without the knowledge of the community leaders and lams and lopons in the dzongkhags, the government should take action against them. Meanwhile, the two claimants as the reincarnation of the Zhabdrung were false and should not be recognized by anyone.29

The government statement articulately put in plain words how the regime framed rules for its connivances and selected the religious figures to be consistent with their interests and eliminate any threat to the throne, which in reality belong to Zhabdrung, who established Bhutan around 440 years ago. Since the reincarnations of Zhabdrung are disowned inside Bhutan and face an unnatural fate, it is natural that recognition should be done by the highest authority outside the country. The same has happened with the tenth reincarnation. The National Assembly of Bhutan resolved that the formal recognition of trulkus and lamas born in Bhutan would be conducted according to Bhutanese traditions. This “tradition” in a country with more than 440 years goes back only to 1969, when the thirtieth session of the Assembly said that a trulku or lama could choose to renounce Bhutanese citizenship and live in other countries. This is the most common tactic of the regime in Bhutan to avoid and eliminate any opposition. The first thing which government does is to expel or force the opposition into exile. That the trulku or lama could choose to renounce Bhutanese citizenship and live in other countries exactly indicates this stratagem of eliminating opposition. Already, the government/king was maneuvering and manipulating the laws against the Zhabdrung, who in 1962 was taken into exile in India for fear of his life. Meanwhile, the government had not followed the traditional system of recognizing trulkus according to Mahayana Buddhist tradition. The Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs provided harsh punishment to all people who supported the claimants, whether they were businesspeople, civil servants, monks, or members of the public, to dissuade this in future as soft repression of social control to create a compliant Bhutanese citizenry. It suggests that the government is ready to continue practicing despotism and shelter its rule under the manipulation of religion and politics in the twenty-first century.

DEMOCRATIC AND HUMAN RIGHTS STRUGGLES
From a historical perspective, the lack of outspoken claims for rights is more likely to be a product of the shared imaginary of the Bhutanese. Most importantly, the image of social order is constituted through a bond of unconditional loyalty between the individual and the state authorities, rooted in the politicized and nationalized ideology of Tsa-wa-sum. The main effect of the promulgation of this normative principle was the semantic separation between the monarchists, defined as loyal citizens, from those who agitated for rights, who were branded as traitors. Criticizing political authorities was defined as treason and penalized by prison or exile, and even capital punishment, even though it was abolished in 2004. These penalties were codified in details in the National Security Act of Bhutan 1992. The historical vestiges of the experiences still governed the imaginary of most Bhutanese, who had come to associate criticism of state authorities with such consequences. These understandings therefore still shaped the way in which they conceived of their political role as one characterized by fear and submission. Despite fear, constraints, and difficulties, once the Zhadrung system was replaced by the monarchical system in 1907, Bhutan saw a number of democratic and human rights struggles as delineated below.

**Sharchop Rebellion**

The third king, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, introduced taxation reforms similar to India’s in 1952. The people of Gomdar, Narpung, and Kangpar, bordering the Indian Territory, were unhappy with the government’s new tax system. They alleged the people in India paid less tax. Thus, around four hundred households thought that joining India would absolve their tax woes. Under the leadership of Kangpar Lha-tshap and Narpung Khotsa, a delegation went to Shillong, Meghalaya, India, and met the Lal Sahib (governor) and presented their appeal. These people were ignorant of Delhi and thought the governor in Shillong was India’s supreme leader. The Lal Sahib informed the prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who in turn enlightened the king of Bhutan about the issue. The king dispatched Gyalpo Zimpoen Thinley Dorji, the former prime minister Jigme Thinley’s father, to suppress the rebellion. He arrested more than forty people. Those arrested were taken to Punakha and imprisoned for twelve to twenty years. More than ten people were thrown alive into the running river. For example, Kanglung, Shek-tala, who was initially imprisoned for four years, was thrown alive into the Punakha River. Many families fled the villages and took
refuge in India. At present there are some two hundred households living since then scattered in Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh in India.\textsuperscript{34}

**Lhotsampa Rebellion**

The Lhotsampas (ethnic Nepalese) in Bhutan were impoverished farmers at the mercy of feudal lords, who were themselves laws in lawless Bhutan. The Lhotsampas peasants were invariably humiliated, evicted, dispossessed, driven away, and subjected to all types of indignities. In this difficult situation, the people from Southern Bhutan defied the authorities and dared to form a political party called “Jai Gorkha” under the guidance of late Sahabir Rai to address their grievances against discrimination and oppression; they organized a mass peaceful rally at Dagana, Bhutan, in 1947. This rebellion was brutally crushed down by the regime, and a high premium was put on the head of late Sahabir Rai. In 1951, late Masur Chhetri of Chirang, who raised the voice against the autocratic system and demanded democratic changes in the country, was arbitrarily arrested, put inside a fresh cow skin bag, and thrown alive in Sunkosh River in front of his family members and villagers.\textsuperscript{35} In such depressing circumstances, the anti-feudal movements launched by the Indian National Congress, the Sikkim State Congress, and the Nepali Congress inspired some hope, and a section of Lhotsampas from Chirang and Samchi districts met at Patgaon in Goalpara district of Assam, India, in November 1952 to form the Bhutan State Congress. Advocates of this party were adherent supporters of democracy and human rights. However, the government foiled their objective. The Bhutan State Congress was organized in the similar way of the Indian National Congress and the Sikkim State Congress in an illiterate and politically innocent Bhutanese community, where the people lived through suppression and humiliation at the hand of feudal lords and where the concept of “public” was anonymous in those days.

For some time, the Congress did raise a series of “policy demands” for redress of their grievances against the government, but nobody listened to them. Then they got intrepid and began to raise serious demands such as abolition of the feudal system, civil and political rights, and democratization of the administration and close ties with India. The Bhutan Congress identified itself with the majority of the Bhutanese. Inspired by the Satyagraha\textsuperscript{36} and launched by Indian National Congress, the Congress launched its civil disobedience movement at Sarbhang and Gaylegphu by sending about one hundred “volunteers” on March 22, 1954. Worried of the rumors and inexperienced in
handling such eventualities, the Government of Bhutan had mobilized its national militia to deal with the situation. The Congress activists were ordered to disperse, which they refused to do. The government ordered to open fire on the Satyagrahis, and it is alleged that many of them were killed and injured in the commotion. Many people, including leaders, were arrested. Those arrested faced a similar fate like that of their Sharchop counterparts. The Congress activists were chased to Indian Territory, from where they had entered Bhutan. The Government of Bhutan maintained that the Satyagraha was resorted to by the outsiders (non-Bhutanese), and they requested the Government of India not to permit Indian Territory for such a use in the future. The Government of India issued orders to the Bhutan State Congress not to use Indian Territory for political purposes. Some fled to India. D. B. Gurung, the president of the Congress, who spent most of his time in Siliguri (West Bengal) in those days, kept it alive by issuing occasional press handouts for a decade or so. Once, when the Government of Bhutan offered amnesty to the political dissenters in 1969, Gurung accepted the amnesty and ended his politics. After his death in 1976, the erstwhile Bhutan State Congress came to an end.

Birth of Contemporary Political Organizations

Tek Nath Rizal was born in 1947 at Lamidara, Chirang District, in Bhutan. At the age of twenty-seven, he became a member of the National Assembly. He served the public sincerely. His hard work, sincerity, and integrity earned the respect of the public and the king. King Jigme (K4) had reposed his faith and confidence upon him, and he was rewarded with his appointment as a member of the Royal Advisory Council in 1984.

When corruption scandals gripped the country, he was assigned the task to lead the Audit Commission to investigate the corruption plaguing the country. His findings indicted eight Dzongdas (chief district administrators). Eight Dzongdas were either terminated from service or sentenced to imprisonment. Their relatives, including former Home Minister Dago Tsering, who were entrenched in influential positions of the government, were very unhappy with Rizal. At that time, the state-sponsored citizenship predicament affected only the Lhortsampa community in the South of Bhutan. A census was conducted only in Southern Bhutan in 1988 on the basis of The Bhutan Citizenship Act 1985, which failed to uphold The 1958 Citizenship Act. The census policy was introduced by Jigme’s government as a deliberate measure to bring artificially engineered demographic balance to consolidate political, economic, and social power, and to weed any
threat to regime for change. Rizal held discussions with Minister Om Pradhan, who urged them to submit an appeal to the king. Rizal, a member of the Royal Advisory Council, along with friends, including thirty-two Lhotsampa government officials, put forward a petition to King Jigme (K4) to look into the citizenship issue in 1988.

The king dispatched an investigation team to Chirang to authenticate the claim. At that time, Dago Tshering was the deputy home minister. His brother, Dago Sitha, was one of the Dzongdas who had been incarcerated on corruption charges as a consequence of Rizal’s unearthing. Dago Tshering had bided his epoch to exact retribution on Rizal. He seized the opportunity. He instructed Chirang Dzongda, Dorji Wangdi under his ministry, to engineer a public contradiction and absurdity to Rizal’s claims in front of the king’s investigation team by threatening the local people into making false statements to the contrary. Under threat and fear, the people disagreed with the claims made in the petition and thus Rizal was wronged and victimized. Deplorably, the king relied heavily on the inputs of the Home Ministry under Dago Tshering, a conservative leader. He didn’t report the ground facts prevailing then. While Dago Tshering and other conservative elites were trying to seek retribution on Rizal, the other was misplacing commiseration.

Fearing for his life, he fled Bhutan for Nepal and formed the People’s Forum for Human Rights in Bhutan to press for political reforms and human rights. This underground organization distributed pamphlets which contained demands for human rights. The government discovered their underground activities and some thirty people were arrested. Rizal and his associates were extradited from Nepal in 1989. He was mentally tortured with mind control devices and kept incarcerated in various jails in Bhutan in inhuman conditions for ten years. Once Jigme’s government became conscious that Rizal would die due to severe torture and inhuman treatment, he was released from jail in 1999. After his release, he tried to stay at Thimphu and Phuentsholing, but couldn’t stay because of the constant threat to his life by government agents. He shifted to Siliguri and New Delhi, India, but once again, he faced a similar situation. This author has ascertained that formal higher authority in India recommended he go to Nepal in 2003 for political reason. The veiled conflict between Rizal and Dago from public eyes and erroneous policy scrutiny by King Jigme (K4) shoved the country into conflict, triggering ethnic cleansing, refugee crises, and the birth of contemporary political and human rights organizations to establish democracy and human rights as delineated below.
Democratic and Human Rights Movement in the South of Bhutan

In the backdrop of Rizal’s episode, some Southern Bhutanese fled to exile in India due to political prosecutions by the regime. They organized themselves politically in the Indian soil to protest the regime atrocities. In 1990, under the leadership of R. K. Budathoki, a peaceful protest took place in Southern Bhutan. Their sole objective was establishment of democracy and human rights. Due to the rise in the number of fleeing Bhutanese people mainly owing to harsh crackdown by regime, a transitory camp was established at Garganda, West Bengal, India. Later on, due to certain political reasons in India beyond the scope of this book, it was shifted to Nepal. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees looked after the refugee camps and provided education and basic amenities and other services in Nepal. In Samchi and Sarbang, the king personally requested the people not to leave the country. The people, however, were intimidated by the security forces of the Jigme government explicitly under his order to leave the country and thus replied to the king that they were leaving the kingdom under duress. King Jigme adopted a strategy of “international outreach and domestic abuses.” Thus, on one hand, he told the people not to leave the country mainly for international community and media consumption, and on the other hand, he ordered the security forces under his command to harass and hound as many Lhotsampas as possible to leave the country. The king, in a convulsion of antipathy, evicted thousands of Lhotsampas from Bhutan.

Many human rights organizations were formed in the exile. Some political outfits like the Bhutan People’s Party and the Bhutan National Democratic Party were also formed. Sinha notes:

It was the Lhotsampa, who had originally raised the demand for the democratization of Bhutan, back in 1952. Likewise, against the backdrop of the royal government’s discrimination of the mid-1980s, it was again the Lhotsampa, who demanded a constitutional monarchy, a written Constitution, a political-party system and direct elections to the Parliament. 40

Contrary to the other Bhutanese ethnic groups, the people of the Nepali origin have been exposed to politics at least from the beginning of the 1950s, when the derivation of political dissent in Bhutan can be tracked down. 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 politicization 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 districts of Bhutan to refugee camps in
Eastern Nepal. Thus, the first overt mass demonstration in Southern Bhutan for establishment of democracy and human rights was birthed from the common Bhutanese people in contemporary Bhutan.

**Democratic and Human Rights Movement in the East of Bhutan**

After imprisonment and torture of a prominent Eastern Bhutanese Rongthong Kuenley Dorje, in 1991 for his alleged role in so called rebellious movement headed by Budathoki, and his consequent release after finding no evidence to support the charges, he fled Bhutan and took refuge in Nepal. Because of the open rebellion by the Lhotsampa community, the government had resorted to an iron fist rule. The reports of government abuses in Bhutan and people inside the country led to the formation of the Druk National Congress in 1994 in exile in Nepal. The basic ideological premise of the Druk National Congress was that only the establishment of constitutional monarchy in Bhutan could bring about a just and humane solution to the political crisis including that of the refugees.

In 1996, various political and human rights organizations in exile jointly formed the United Front for Democracy, with Rongthong Kuenley as its chairperson. It consists of almost all the educated and intellectual section of the Bhutanese in exile. In the capacity of chairperson of the United Front for Democracy, Rongthong Kuenley went to Delhi twice to garner the support of the Indian people. However, the Government of India arrested him in 1997, at the request of the Royal Government of Bhutan. The plan was to whisk him away to Bhutan. A mass protest throughout Bhutan had been planned, but his imprisonment derailed this. People inside Bhutan were discouraged because of India’s arrest of Rongthong Kuenley. Most people inside Bhutan became hopeless and scared after witnessing his fate. People witnessed the Government of Bhutan’s long tentacles in India and with the Government of India.

In October 1997, people and monks of Eastern Bhutan held peaceful protests asking for democracy and human rights, including religious rights, despite heavy odds stacked against them. The people were persecuted for the slightest dissidence. Hundreds were arrested and imprisoned without proper trial. Rai notes:

At one point, the pro-democracy forces from eastern Bhutan organized a peaceful demonstration in support of human rights and democracy in 1997. But people were rewarded with the armed repression. Sixteen institutes of Buddhist learning of the Nyingmapa teachings were closed and the students were sent back to their homes. A monk was shot at point blank by the district chief, which went unpunished, while the Chief Abbot was imprisoned for eight years. Many others have faced rigorous prison terms of
merely raising their voice for the right to freedom of their own religion. Some people were even made to flee the country to join their relatives in the refugee camps in Nepal.43

The government suppressed the movement, imprisoning more than three hundred people and even brutally killing two. The arrested persons were given various sentences, ranging from five to thirteen years’ rigorous imprisonment.

Ronthong’s arrest and subsequent press coverage in Delhi had a great consequence in Bhutan. For the first time, the international community came to understand about the absence of democracy and human rights in Bhutan from the Sharchop community and the treatment of Bhutanese refugees by the Royal Government of Bhutan. In order to present Bhutan’s commitment to democratic ideals and to discredit the claims, King Jigme (K4) was forced to constitute a new political system and introduced one-year term for the prime minister and voting for ministers by the rubber stamp National Assembly.

The United Front for Democracy became non-functional after Ronthong’s imprisonment, despite the appointment of an acting chairperson. In reality, most of exiled leaders were apprehensive of traveling to India, fearing the possibility of meeting the same fate as Rongthong. The exiled Bhutanese political activities shifted once again back to Nepal from India. For some years, the movement slowed down. Moreover, the agents of the Bhutan government infiltrated the various organizations based in exile and played a malevolent role to the split of the Druk National Congress and other political groups. Nevertheless, the main motive of the government to get rid of the political parties and human rights organizations was not achieved, since they enjoy a strong membership and support within Bhutan and in exile and diasporas. Thierry Mathou has observed:

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 be resettled in the United States under a third-country resettlement program, 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 [Royal Government of Bhutan] will have to count on the development of a political opposition well organized 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.44

It is difficult to anticipate how the movement for “inclusive democracy and human rights” will take its course of action in the future as still the refugees in the diasporas are not fully settled themselves politically, economically, and socially.
THE OTHER WIND OF POLITICAL DISCONTENTS, DISSENTS, AND ROYAL SMOKESCREEN

The conventional account of authoritarianism rests only on the conflict between those who rule and those who are ruled. The reason that an autocratic ruler was established in the first place has little to do with threats from within the ruling elite. It does not address what Svolik terms “the problem of authoritarian power-sharing.” It refers to a conflict among regime insiders in authoritarian regimes, which plays a substantial role in shaping authoritarian politics. The most autocratic regime must share power with other ruling members, since they do not control enough resources to thwart challenges of those excluded from power. Therefore, the commitment problem beleaguered the political exchange between the incumbent ruler and his ruling clique. In addition to the democratic struggles contemplated above, Bhutan has witnessed a number of political discontents, dissents, and power struggles confined to king, palace, family members, and conservative elites, as delineated below.

Power Struggle between the Dorji Family, the King, and Conservative Elites

The Wangchuk dynasty has run through a series of conspiracies within the family circle and its close coterie since its establishment in 1907. The relationship between Dorji and the Wangchuk family has to a large extent shaped and reshaped the emergence of contemporary Bhutan. Ugyen Dorji was born in 1855 to Pala Gyaltsen and a lady from Tsendong in the Paro Valley. Ugen Dorji migrated from Bhutan to Kalimpong. A special bond of friendship flourished between the first king Ugen Wangchuck and Ugen Dorji. This friendship proved constructive to the first king. He appointed him as the Drungpa of Haa and Pasakha in 1898. He also handed him the responsibility of settling Lhotsampas in Southern Bhutan. The collection of taxes and administrative responsibilities of Southern Bhutan were also entrusted to him.

The British gifted the eighteen-acre estate in Kalimpong to Ugyen Dorji in return for his services. It came to be known as “Bhutan House” and became his seat of power. In 1910, Ugyen Dorji received the title of “Raja” from the British viceroy as a personal distinction for the valuable service, he had offered during the Young Husband Expedition to Lhasa in 1903 and 1904. King Ugen Wangchuck appointed Ugen Dorji as Gongzim of Bhutan, taking the title of
Gongzim, a hereditary position,\textsuperscript{52} which was equivalent to a senior minister after 1907.\textsuperscript{53}

In 1916, Gongzim Ugyen Dorji died in Kalimpong and his only son, Sonam Tobgye Dorji, took over his father’s hereditary post as Gongzim and continued to serve the king and people. Due to his experience in assisting his father on many of his expeditions, the British also gave Sonam Tobgye the role of Bhutan agent and inherited the British-India’s Raja title.\textsuperscript{54} In 1918, Sonam Tobgye Dorji married Rani Chuni Wangmo, the sister of the king of Sikkim. They had five children,\textsuperscript{55} all born and brought up in Bhutan House and educated in the elite schools set up by the British within Darjeeling and Kalimpong in West Bengal, India. Sonam Tobgye and his wife were popularly known to Lhotseampas and in neighboring regions of Tibet and India as “Raja ST Dorji and Rani Chuni Wangmo.” They shared a close and sound relationship with Tibet and India. Table 2.3 provides the pedigree of the Dorji family and their involvements to silhouette emergence of modern Bhutan.

### Table 2.3. Lineage of the Dorji Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position/Status</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Born</th>
<th>Died</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raja Ugyen Dorji</td>
<td>Gongzim (senior minister)</td>
<td>1907–1916</td>
<td>1855</td>
<td>1916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayi Thubten Wangmo, wife of</td>
<td>Raja Ugyen Dorji</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raja Sonam Topgay Dorji</td>
<td>Gongzim (senior minister)</td>
<td>1917–1953</td>
<td>1896</td>
<td>1953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rani Chuni, wife of Raja Sonam Topgay Dorji</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1896</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ugyen Rimpoche, son of Topgay Dorji</td>
<td>Adviser to the third queen and visionary entrepreneur</td>
<td>1932–March 2006</td>
<td>1932</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashi Kesang Choden, daughter of Topgay Dorji</td>
<td>Third queen of Bhutan</td>
<td>1952–</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tashi, daughter of Topgay Dorji</td>
<td>Helped in the affairs of the Bhutan House, Kalimpong</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1923</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When Jigme\textsuperscript{56} was seven years old, second King Jigme Wangchuck of Bhutan conferred on him the Red Scarf with the title of Ha Drungpa on his coronation day in Punakha Dzong in 1927 in recognition of the valuable services rendered by the Dorji family to the Kingdom of Bhutan, just as the first king, Ugyen Wangchuck, had conferred the Red Scarf with the title of Ha Drungpa to Jigme’s father, Gongzim Sonam Tobgye Dorji, when he was thirteen years old. In 1949, Ha Drungpa Jigme accompanied Crown Prince Jigme Dorji Wangchuck to England and Scotland.

After the death of father Gongzim Sonam Tobgye Dorji in Kalimpong on September 24, 1953, Jigme Palden Dorji became Bhutan’s agent in India, prime minister of Bhutan, and regent for a short period. He became the principal advisor to the third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck and served the king and the Bhutanese people with great fidelity. The third king appointed him as prime minister of Bhutan in 1962. In March 1963, when Third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck suffered a massive heart attack and lay close to death, it was the late Prime Minister Jigme who saved the king’s life by his speedy action in flying up the best specialists from India and England to care for the king.

The above enlightenment substantiates that he was a reformist prime minister. However, by the 1960s, the political power of the Dorji family was finally stripped by means of assimilation as well as elimination as new factions of reformists and conservatives have emerged ever since.\textsuperscript{57} As the king was unavailable, Prime Minister Jigme Dorji sought to fill a leadership role; however, this led to tensions with the military and monarchist factions.\textsuperscript{58} Dorji conflicted with the Royal Bhutan Army over the use of military vehicles, forced the retirement of some fifty military officers, and sought to limit the power of state-supported religious institutions such as the Dratshang Lhentshog and Je Khenpo.\textsuperscript{59} On April 5, 1964, reformist Prime Minister Jigme was assassinated in Phuentsholing by group of traditionalists, monarchists, and Yangki cadres as the king lay ill in Switzerland. The Dorji family was subsequently put under close watch.\textsuperscript{60} Jigme was a towering personality and with his untimely death, Bhutan lost one of its faithful and greatest sons.\textsuperscript{61}

Here is a brief narrative of what actually happened after the assassination of the prime minister. King Jigmi Dorji Wangchuck was in Switzerland undergoing medical treatment. In his absence, the prime minister was cruelly assassinated in Phuntsholing on April 5, 1964. The king returned and set up an investigation committee. The young assassin revealed that he had acted upon instruction of conservative Brigadier Chabda Namgyal (the king’s own uncle), chief of the
army, who also hailed from Dungkar in Kurtoe, the birthplace of Jigme Namgyal (father of first King Ugen Wangchuk) and Lieutenant Sangye Dorje. The two of them had bribed Tsagay Jambay, the assassin, and his friend Doley with Nu. 1,000 each. They also gave them weapons with orders to shoot the prime minister in secrecy. Even if they were caught or identified, the brigadier was not to be exposed. On the contrary, Tsagay Jambay was caught red-handed and he revealed everything. Some sixty people involved in the assassination conspiracy were arrested. In an open trial conducted by a tribunal of nine judges in the central hall of Tashichho Dzong, the brigadier and captain along with the assassin were sentenced to capital punishment in accordance with the article Tsa-1.3 of the Thrimzhung Chhenmo (Supreme Law). The accomplice Doley was sentenced to life imprisonment. Bacho Phugyel, another accused soldier, disemboweled himself while in custody.

The king’s Tibetan mistress, Yangki, and her father, who had been implicated in the assassination, suspected that Jigme Dorji’s younger brother Lhendup would use the king’s absence to exact revenge. They attempted to flee into India, but were detained at Gelephu. They eventually fled the country. The king’s own uncle and head of the Royal Bhutan Army, Namgyal Bahadur, was among those executed for their role in the attempted coup. The post of prime minister was vacant, and the king identified Jigme Dorji’s brother Lhendup as the successor. Lhendup’s mother, then head of the Dorji family, advised the king against giving any title to Lhendup because it would have made the situation more explosive. In 1964, however, the king announced his intention to appoint Lhendup as prime minister.

It is interesting to note that the queens or personal women in relations with kings played a significant role in Bhutanese politics. The woman who exercised political power on behalf of third king was his mistress. In 1958, the third king took Yangki, of Tibetan origin, as his mistress. Yangki used to appoint many people to senior government positions. Her father, Kayang-bu, also began to exert power drawn from his daughter. One example of such misuse of power is his grabbing land belonging to villagers in Bumthang and Gelegphu. Until 1961, Queen Kesang Choden was ignorant of the king’s affair with Yangki.

The differences between the king and queen became very serious, especially after Jigme’s assassination in 1964. She found out that the murder weapon used by Tsagay to shoot her brother was indeed handed over by Kayang-bu, Yangki’s father. She deduced that the sophistication of the assassination plan couldn’t
have been possible without the tacit support of the king. She accused the king of her brother’s murder.

Lhendup Dorji, the youngest of the Dorji brothers, succeeded his eldest brother, when the king appointed him as acting prime minister. Nevertheless, during these intriguing times, when the king was in Switzerland, supposedly for medical examination, the acting prime minister’s activities back home infuriated the monarch. The king consequently sent a warning message from Switzerland. Considering the message from the king as a threat to dispense a similar fate as was administered to the late prime minister, Lhendup Dorji and his sister, Ashi Tashi Dorji, with other associates, Brigadier U. B. Tangbi, Commissioner Rinchen Dorji, Thrimda Penjore Wangdi, Ranger Nado Rinchen, and Phuentsholing SDO Lha Tshering fled to Nepal in 1965 before the king returned to Bhutan. Lhendup and his team were effectively exiled by the National Assembly.

An attempt was made on the life of the king at Kyichu, Paro, on July 31, 1965, by conservatives, where he had gone for a prayer ceremony. When he went to a makeshift lavatory near his tent at night, a hand grenade was tossed against him. Luckily, he had heard the clicking sound when the safety pin was being removed, and he threw himself flat on the ground. The grenade exploded, but the king was unharmed. The culprit was traced and sentenced to life imprisonment. The unfortunate event involving the chief of the army, aggravated later on by flight of senior officers to Nepal, shook the confidence of people in the army.

Despite all odds, the queen held her family firmly together and established a strong foothold on power through the then crown prince, Jigme Singye Wangchuck. Ugen, popularly known as Dasho “Rimp,” became a close confidant and the right hand of queen. His business in Phuentsholing too flourished, which he used as a means to serve the needs of the queen and the crown prince. The third king and Queen Kesang Choden reconciled in the early 1970s after a strained relationship and announced the investiture of the crown prince, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, as Trongsa Penelop, heir apparent to the king, in 1972. Right after the demise of the king in 1972 and the ascending of Jigme Singye Wangchuck to the throne at a tender age of seventeen years as the fourth king, Dorje family members Lhendup Dorji, Tashi Dorji, and their associates returned to Bhutan in 1972 from exile in Nepal. The older Lhotsampas, even now, regard the Dorji family as their strong patron.

The role of the Dorje family to emergence of modern Bhutan and the new era is immense. The period also depicts conflicts between the conservative elites of the
Wangchuk family, army, the role of Yangki, and the power struggle between political stakeholders within family and periphery and fate of one who is willing to cleanse the residual conservative political elements in a feudal and traditional Bhutanese polity.

**Political Conspiracy and Power Struggle between the Yanki Family and the King**

Tibetan refugees, including a few with marital ties to prominent Bhutanese families, started pouring into Bhutan from 1959 after the Dalai Lama fled to India. During the 1960s, the Tibetan community proliferated in Bhutan. Several Tibetans started businesses and opened shops in Thimphu, Trongsa, Trashigang, and Bumthang. The third king had four children with a Tibetan mistress Yangki in the 1960s.68

The matter of succession was thus on the agenda in elite circles, which inherently weakens a regime as multiple elite factions opt to have their candidate picked as successor.69 Difficulties began in the late 1960s. The situation became critical during the mid-1970s. Tibetans became a factor in domestic politics and were regularly suspected to have helped foment some of Bhutan’s internal upheavals. Although they respected Bhutan’s political and religious institutions, their primary allegiance was toward the Dalai Lama. From the government’s point of view, the risk was real to see Bhutan become a shelter for Tibetan political activists, who could use the Bhutanese territory to back up actions against China. Suspicion was nurtured by the influence of Tibetans in business circles and in the entourage of the king that created resentment and jealousy. That situation coincided with an atmosphere of conspiracy that prevailed on the internal scene.

With high stakes involved in domestic and external relations during that time, the actual truth of the conspiracy is disputed by the government even though the whole of Bhutan knows it. More than twelve trucks of weapons had crossed the Chukha checkpost. The Yanki faction had planned that no member of the Wangchuk dynasty would be spared. However, she herself was in India when the conspiracy progressed. It was Lhotsampas in Phuntsholing, trying to be loyal to the Wangchuk king, who leaked out the entire plan. For almost two years, King Jigme (K4) did not go to his coronation for fear that the conspirators would blow up the coronation function. After a series of preparation, ensuring security that the coronation celebration will not be hampered, King Jigme (K4) entered the
throne room. The Yanki and her family have since been hard-pressed out of the country.

In 1974, the government cracked down harshly on Tibetan refugees in Bhutan, ostensibly for conniving with the late king’s Tibetan spouse, Yanki, to wrest the throne for her son. They were persecuted and jailed, and there were many reported deaths; the Tibetans were given the choice to either become Bhutanese citizens or “follow the Dalai Lama” and leave the country.\textsuperscript{70} In 1979, the National Assembly decided that Tibetans, who had arrived in Bhutan after 1959, had to choose between becoming Bhutanese citizens and leaving the country. Out of 6,300 Tibetans, about 2,300 people accepted to make allegiance to the king and therefore became Bhutanese citizens. The situation of the remaining four thousand refugees proved to be a difficult question to be solved. In the early 1980s, the Dalai Lama regularly touched this issue while visiting Western countries. Some members of the National Assembly proposed to expel refugees who refused to become Bhutanese. Therefore, the government preferred to negotiate their departure with India. Half of the refugees eventually settled in India, while the others scattered in the West, mainly in Europe and North America.

After almost forty-five years, it has been reported that King Jigme Kesher (K5) is said to have reconciled with Yangki’s family. But the question arises: what about the innocent soldiers and Tibetans who were murdered by the royal government during this incident? In 1974, Yangki’s pursuit of her ambitions by using Tibetan refugees and Bhutanese loyal to her gave rise to a crisis. The offshoot of this not only affected large numbers of Tibetan refugees but also resulted in the execution and incarceration of many Bhutanese civil and military personnel. Large numbers of people went missing and are still unaccounted for.

\textbf{Power Struggle between Yab Ugen/Queens and Wangchuk Family Members}

The royalists continue to enjoy the sound bites of power. Jason Brownlee states the autocratic rulers promoted trusted family members and elites to positions of power in order to ensure their own security.\textsuperscript{71} Although the king seems highly popular, frustration was growing over the way in which his extended family, which was increasingly perceived as unaccountable, was seen to exploit its position of power.\textsuperscript{72} Thus, it is rational and arithmetically prudent in the context of Bhutan to ensure that the ruling inner circle is vested with more political power for the continuation of the political status quo.
From 1978, Dorji Wangmo, and subsequently her three younger sisters, became personally associated with King Jigme (K4) until he married them all in 1988. Dorji Wangmo slowly became very influential. Her father, Ugyen Dorji, filled in the shoes of Yangki’s father. He abused his powers, and he too forcefully took away lands belonging to villagers and lucrative business deals. King Jigme (K4) simply issued kashos, giving Ugen Dorji right of ownership of the villagers’ lands. He never contemplated on how his kashos adversely affected the people. A classic example being the dismissal of five judges, including Chief Justice Paljor Dorji for giving a judgment against his kasho in which he had given the land belonging to the thirty villagers of Ha Tsaphey to Wangdi Gyaltsen, the maternal uncle of Ashi Dorji Wangmo. Even the members of the royal family were not spared. Ashi Sonam Choden, eldest sister of King Jigme, was his representative in the Ministry of Finance. Ashi Sonam Choden had sacked Dorji Wangmo when she was a commoner from the Tourism Department. When Dorji Wangmo became queen, she exacted her retribution on Ashi Sonam Choden. Ashi Sonam Choden was relieved of her responsibility at Ministry of Finance. It has been reported time and again that there is a latent conflict between the Wangchuk family and the Yab Ugen family on business issues as Yab Ugen has become richest Bhutanese within a short span of time through crony capitalism encouraged by King Jigme (K4), after he got married to Yab’s four daughters. The Wangchuk dynasty has run through a series of conspiracies within the family circle since its establishment.

CONCLUSION

Bhutan’s present version of a political system is kept going largely for the benefits of the predating royalist and conservative elites, whose members cream off the benefits and the richest prizes while justifying their predation in the language of Gross National Happiness, Tsa-wa-sum, National Security, and anti-nationalism. The royalist leaders continue to enjoy the sound bites of power, and the reality is well hidden from Bhutanese scrutiny or even basic understanding as the system is closed and still traditional. At the core of Bhutanese political system is the moral decay that is tolerated by the Bhutanese because the cleansing of its “Augean Stables” is too traumatic to contemplate as it invites the severest punishment and imprisonment, as deliberated in the next chapter.

It is clear that the Bhutanese people have made numerous attempts to introduce inclusive democracy and human rights in Bhutan, beginning in 1947. However,
royal regimes have preempted each time by introducing cosmetic changes and suppressed and crushed each democratic struggle very brutally, as will be revealed in the next chapter. Also the above exposition of political dissents and discontentment has revealed that murder, conspiracies, and treacherous killings dominate the traditional political system of Bhutan even today. Although the king is popular, frustration was growing over the way in which his extended family, which was increasingly perceived as unaccountable, was seen to exploit its position of power. Although this criticism was not as yet directed toward the king or the monarchy in general, discontent was thus smoldering beneath the surface even though everything appeared calm at the top. Even if its internal legitimacy was fragile, the government was by contrast highly successful in creating a positive brand for its state project in the outside world. In the new millennium, it successfully projected Bhutan as a country with the highly appealing development strategy of Gross National Happiness. This philosophy maintained the essentialist view of the state, but simultaneously attempted to merge this with the modernity narrative.

NOTES

5. There are different types of dissent such as *pathological dissent* (violent revolution/assassination/bombing campaigns, and such) motivated as much by hatred, revenge, or other emotions rather than a purposeful campaign to change government policy or actors. Revenge killings carried out by dissenters for no purpose other than revenge fall into this category). *Violent directed dissent* (violent actions directed at either changing a regime or its policy) includes the assassination of government officials, bombings of government facilities, and disruption of government public functions such as official public speeches). *Passive dissent* (non-violent protest/labor and student strikes, marches, pressures or campaigns against a regime directed at changing its leaders or policy) and *systemic dissent* (civil society opposition, formation of illegal opposition parties or groups, letter writing campaigns, etc.) may couple with semi-legal or legal opposition, and those engaged in it may transition between opposition and dissent.
6. Desid Umzey Tenzin Drugyel (1651–1655) was the first Desid. Pekar Jungney was the first Je Khenpo.
7. In 1907, Ugyen Wangchuck became Bhutan’s first king. The seventh reincarnate of the Zhabdrung, Jigme Dorji had been born in 1905 at Shar Dirang, Bomdala, Tawang District, of present-day Arunanchal
Pradesh, India. Incidentally, the second king, Jigme Wangchuck, was also born in 1905. King Ugyen Wangchuck and the central monastic body invited the Zhabdrung to Punakha, when he was six years old (1911) and ceremoniously enthroned him. The Zhabdrung’s family also accompanied him to the Talo Palace and the Punakha Dzong.

According to Yangbi Lopon Sangay Dorji, Yab Dasho Ugyen Dorji’s father was a descendant of fifth Zhabdrung Sungtruel Choglay Yeshey Nidup and sixth Zhabdrung Sungtruel Choglay Jigme Tenzin, and his mother a descendant of Zhabdrung Thugtruel Jigme Dorji. One school of thought in Bhutan claims that his first cousin Ashi Dorji Wangmo married Lopen Sangay Tenzin. Four boys and three girls were born out of this matrimony, Yab Ugyen Dorji being the eldest son (present fourth queen mother’s father). From amongst the Sungrul’s family, Yab Ugyen Dorji, Ama Thuji Zam, and others in the family have a prominent place in Bhutan today. Their eldest son, Sangay Nidup, was rotational prime minister and minister for health and education in King Jigme’s cabinet. He was also a party president of the People’s Democratic Party formed in 2007 but later resigned. Their eldest daughter is Ashi Bidha, and her husband, Ugyen Dorji, was former Speaker of National Assembly. The second, third, fourth, and the fifth daughters are the present queen’s mother. Ashi Dorji Wangmo is the present queen mother. The maternal grandfather of His Majesty the King, a descendant of Zhabdrung, has initiated and sponsored the construction of several lhakhangs, chortens and established various shedras, lobdras, and nunneries. For detail, see D. Gyetmo, Kuenselonline, “Bajolhakhang Consecrated” http://www.kuenselonline.com/bajo-lhakhang-consecrated (accessed January 2015).


10. Ibid.

11. The Zhabdrung’s brother, Chhoki Gyeltshen, went to India for the pilgrimage in 1929 and 1930. The rumor of Chhoki Gyeltshen’s meeting with Mahatma Gandhi, during his pilgrimage, with the objectives of garnering support for the Zhabdrung from British India as well as influential Indian politicians to challenge the monarchy’s spread over the country. The author could not confirm from any sources that he met Mahatma Gandhi, but when he arrived back, the then Paro Penlop Tshering Penjore, Gangtey Tulkhu, reported these rumors as the truth to King Jigme Wangchuck. He promptly ordered Lame Gonpa Dasho Phuntscho Wangdi to investigate the matter and dispatched him to Talo with a five-hundred-strong army. Even though they found out that Zhabdrung was unaware of Choki Gyeltshen’s story, the king asked the central monastic body and senior government officials to vouch for the Zhabdrung in writing. The central monastic body convened a meeting to sign the statement, but the Samten Jamtsho walked away from the meeting and hence sealed the fate of the Zhabdrung’s life in 1931.

12. It refers to Chamberlain.


17. Ibid, 92.

18. Dzongda is a district administrator and Thrimpon is a district judge.
19. It has been reported that the seventh Zhabdrung Jigme Dorji was assassinated at Talo under the second king’s orders. The eighth Zhabdrung, Jigme Tenzin Chojay, was assassinated at Tashigang under the third king’s orders.


21. Check P. Bista, “Shabdrung Rinpoche Supports Refugee Repatriation,” Kathmandu Post, November 13, 2002. Also refer to L. E. Rose, The Politics of Bhutan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977). He has reported that in 1907, in an effort to reform the dysfunctional system, the penlops orchestrated the establishment of a Bhutanese monarchy with Ugyen Wangchuck, the penlop of Trongsa installed as hereditary king, with the support of Britain and against the wishes of Tibet. The royal family suffered from questions of legitimacy in its early years, with the reincarnations of the various Zhabdrungs posing a threat.


24. The names of sources have been withheld for their security inside Bhutan.


27. It refers to chairman of National Council of Bhutan.


29. Ibid.


31. It has been brought to light from classical Bhutanese text that Tsa-Wa-Sum has two undertones: one tantric and another modern. In a tantric Buddhist context, Tsa-Wa-Sum denotes the three roots that are expected to assist the disciple in his efforts to obtain enlightenment and serve as a source of “blessings, attainments, and activities.” According to Phuntsho, the notion has been appropriated from Buddhism to fit modern political purposes as the trinity of Bhutanese nationhood. In the search for a shared national identity understood in terms of oneness, it came to signify a bond of loyalty between the population and the political authorities (i.e., ruler and ruled). Dargey describes the character of this bond in following words: It basically conveys the three basic foundations of the country—“the King, the Government and the People”—which means king as the most benevolent of benefactors, the royal government as the most considerate and beneficent of governments, and the subjects as the devoted and faithful citizens. At the heart of this lies the idea of a reciprocal relationship between the governors, who are expected to take on roles as kind, caring, and benevolent parents, and the people, who in return are expected to obey the former with unquestioned loyalty. Although the discourse in principle is secular, metaphors that sacralize the rulers have a tendency to slip through. An example is Dargey’s projection of the king: “He is the sun whose rays of loving kindness shine equally on the people.” This is related to the historic view of the monarch as famous reincarnations and the tendency to perceive and treat them as Bodhisattvas. Also see chapter 4 for more details.


33. Royal chamberlain.


35. For details, refer to T. Rizal, Torture Killing Me Softly, 3rd ed. (Kathmandu: HRWF and GRINSO,
2010), 16–17.
36. It refers to civil disobedience.
38. For details, consult O. Pradhan, *Bhutan: The Roar of the Thunder Dragon* (Thimphu: Kmedia, 2012). He notes that: “how the well-intentioned policies of the government to integrate the many ethnic differences in the country, especially in the south and east failed due to the few self-serving dissident leaders and the unpopular bureaucratic means of implementing the policies by the dzongdas or the district governors. The dzongdas resorted to “methods that were deliberately humiliating and without concern for the dignity of the person of Nepali origin in the south. Why some dzongdas used such harsh methods when they would not dare do it in other parts of the country, I am still to figure out.”

Om Pradhan has recommended to Tek Nath Rizal to submit the petition to King Jigme to redress the census problem of the Lhotsampas community. However, it has been noted that Rizal and Pradhan had latent antagonism and distrust among each other due to their vaulting ambitions to be near the king. This is not uncommon in traditional society like Bhutan, where the patronage-client network of monarchy operates and the king makes and breaks everything. There is one school of thought among Lhtosampas that Pradhan has not kept his words to convey the real message to the king about the whole issue of census problem in the South and their intention of submitting the petition to king. Pradhan was found more comfortable with company of Dago Tsering’s faction than Rizal due to his marriage connection. The account of his book *Bhutan: The Roar of the Thunder Dragon* strongly corroborates this perspective.
39. Author interviewed him in Kathmandu in May/June 2012.
42. See chapter 3 of this book to have a glimpse of hard and soft repressions and vicious torture methods used by the royal government to suppress the people and discourage them from politics and joining protests.
48. Drungpa means divisional officer.
49. The Dorji family’s charge of Southern Bhutan came to end after the third King, Jigme Dorji
Wangchuk, annulled the practice of serfdom in 1953. Bhutan’s central government, in its first National Assembly session, brought the whole of Bhutan under a central administration, thus granting equal legal recognition to all Bhutaneses.


51. Chamberlain to the ruler.


55. The eldest son Jigme Palden became prime minister of Bhutan, the second eldest daughter Tashi helped in the affairs of the Bhutan House, Kesang Choden married the third king of Bhutan, Ugyen became an influential businessperson, and Lhendup became acting prime minister.

56. Jigme Palden Dorji, the late prime minister of Bhutan, was the eldest son of Gongzim Sonam Tobgye Dorji and Mayuem Choing Wangmo Dorji. He was born in Kalimpong on December 14, 1919. He studied in North Point in Darjeeling and in Bishop Cotton School in Simla with his first cousins, Crown Prince Paljor Namgyal and Prince Thondup Namgyal of Sikkim. Later, Jigme and Crown Prince Thondup Namgyal joined ICS in Dehra Dun, where they met their lifelong friend, guide, and adviser Nari Rustomji.


62. The dollar value of Bhutanese ngultrum on September 3, 2014, at exchange rate of USD$1 = Nu. 60.7 is $16.48. However, its discounted value was very high in the 1960s.


66. The first two Kings of Bhutan were never influenced by their mothers or their queens, unlike the two succeeding kings. Ashi Phuentsho Choden and Ashi Pem Dechen were never given political space by their husband, the second king. After his death, Ashi Phuentsho Choden became the chief advisor to her son, the third king. Ashi Pem Dechen was a devoted religious woman and became a nun.


68. They were Jurme Wangdi, Namgyal Wangdi, Dechen Wangmo, and Kesang Choden. The king, before passing away, ensured that they had all the wealth they considered necessary for a lifetime.


73. Royal decree.
74. For instance in 1988, Wangdi Gyeltshen, maternal uncle of the queens, wanted to purchase three acres of public grazing land jointly owned by thirty households in Haa Tsaphey. As the villagers declined the offer, Wangdi approached the queens who in turn put out the matter up to the king. The king issued a “Kasho” that the land was to be given to Wangdi Gyeltshen. The distressed villagers petitioned to the king that they had nowhere else to graze their cattle. On receiving the petition, the king issued orders to the High Court to investigate and settle the case. The jury comprising of Chief Justice Dasho Paljore Dorji and Judges Colonel Gyem Tshering, Major Pem Tsering, Tshewang Penjor, Lam Sanga, D. N. Katwal, H. Humagai, Jigme Wangdi, K. B. Ghalley, and Sangay Dorji, after examining the case, gave their verdict in favor of villagers. An agreement to this effect was drawn up and signed by the chief justice, Colonel Gyem Tsering, Major Pem Tshering, Tshewang Penjor, H. Humagai, and Lam Sanga. The rest of the jury was absent during the signing of the agreement. A report was then submitted to the king. The king was outraged that his Kasho issued to Wangdi had not been adhered to and in the outcome that followed, the chief justice was suspended and the other members of the jury, who were signatories to the agreement, were terminated from their services. Six persons including Dempon Lengo and Dempon Naku from among thirty petitioners’ household were sentenced to six years in prison and sent to Gasa to serve their sentence. A year later, they were released due to political problems and the refugee crisis in the South and East of Bhutan.
76. The four sisters and queens are Ashi Tshering Yangdön Wangchuck, Ashi Tshering Pem Wangchuck, Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, and Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck.
Chapter Three

State Repression, Social Control, and Civil Resistance

Democratic protest and mass demonstrations have erupted many times since the monarchy replaced the Zhabdrung’s highly decentralized democratic government as early as 1947. Protest does not always have the desired effect of its organizers, and in Bhutan protest is followed by increased political repression and policies designed to increase the social compliance of its population. Members of the opposition are jailed, exiled, or assaulted and murdered.

Since 1907, there has been a steady expansion of the state’s ability to control its territory and the people within it. The control is purposefully constructed to eliminate opposition against the regime. Control has expanded in part by the regime’s careful dismantling of institutions such as Zhabdrung or democratic struggles that facilitated the protests that have challenged its rule. Every nonviolent attempt by citizens to challenge the callous policies of rulers met with violent repression from the state. State and societal factors play the most crucial role to explain the lack of political organizing in Bhutan. When viewed over time, several patterns emerge. The government violently responds to campaigners at each protest, and the government-perpetuated violence increased following every subsequent encounter.

This chapter presents a historical narrative of Bhutan through the examination of how the royal government physically eliminated the political oppositions and dissidents and suppressed the peaceful democratic protests each time in a violent way. The analysis in this chapter outlines how Bhutan’s Wangchuk kings have expanded their control over 108 years of rule. It examines the nature of the response of the royal regime to mass demonstrations and political dissents elucidated in the previous chapter. The protests of the 1950s, the 1990s, and today, of which 1990/1997 remain the most significant events in the nation’s protest history, came during the period of greatest international post–Cold War era.

Dissent might be more likely in authoritarian countries since the government generally closes other avenues of legitimate oppositions. Most governments wish
to deter dissenting if possible and suffocate and quash it, if deterrence fails. The Bhutan government has adopted a policy to repress all the dissents and dissenters, as explained in the next section.

ROYAL REGIME’S TOOL OF REPRESSION AND SOCIAL CONTROL TO ELIMINATE POLITICAL DISSENTS AND OPPOSITIONS

There is a recent growing interest in political science to developing understandings of the institutions of authoritarian control and repression. Political repression is a policy of coercion or threat by government officials, aimed at potential opponents to limit their ability to dissent against the government or its policies. Repression researchers often equate repression with violence against protestors. Poe and Tate argue coercive activities targeting political operatives by governments—such as murder, torture, forced disappearance, and imprisonment of persons for their political views—intend to induce compliance in others. Wintrobe defines repression as “restrictions on the rights of citizens to criticize the government, restrictions on the freedom of the press, restrictions on the rights of opposition parties to campaign against the government, or as is common under the totalitarian dictatorship, the outright prohibition of groups, associations, or political parties opposed to the government.” It is also difficult to quantify soft repression techniques such as stigma, silencing, and ridicule that also comprise a dictator’s toolbox. Common wisdom is that the authority uses divide and rule strategies against armed and nonviolent opponents.

Repression comes in many forms, each of which serves a distinct purpose for the regime. The two categories of repression are civil liberty or empowerment rights repression (i.e., censorship, restrictions on assembly), which typically affects the population at large, and physical integrity rights repression (i.e., torture, disappearances, political imprisonment), which typically affects specific individuals. Most dictators use a mixture of both, and Bhutan is no exception to this dictum.

Political repression in the Bhutanese context refers to the systematic violation of the civil liberties and human rights of groups and/or individuals. In other expressions, it consists of both physical integrity rights repression and civil liberty or empowerment rights repression. The regime in Bhutan tightly controls their population to eliminate opportunities for demonstrations. Authoritarian
Bhutanese regime provides a degree of certainty—citizens in Bhutan are extremely aware of the consequences of certain actions, and people subsequently self-censor themselves to ensure that no appearance of transgressions could be construed by the authorities. Lust-Okar observes that “authoritarian institution is the primary shapers of the environment in which opposition doesn’t occur.”

Authoritarian institutions in Bhutan limit opposition by constructing an environment that induces compliance from the broader society. The royal regime conducts targeted political repression against mobilized activists as needed.

Social control policies, those that cultivate compliance of the citizenry, are essential to keep people from joining or creating political opposition to the state. The compliant citizenry helps preclude the rise of future resistance groups that can eventually threaten the government. Besides political repression of political activists, regimes apply more generalized and indiscriminate forms of repression, violence, and coercion against members or groups within a Bhutanese society, particularly Lhotsampas and Sharchops. This is the broader context in which political organizing occurs. The emphasis on repression conceals that broader authoritarian conditions also deter protest. Political activists are targeted with hard, or forced-based, repression that uses violence to quell an opposition, such as lengthy jail sentences and live ammunition to break up protests as has been done in the 1950s, 1990, and 1997 protests. Also, the royal regime provides life sentences to political prisoners to dissuade any individuals to undertake such risky protest in the future.

Bhutan has used soft repression, including stigma, silencing, and ridicule, to create psychological and emotional constraints to demobilize politically active individuals. Their concept of the use of force is adapted to address the royal regime’s more subtle threat of violence against its civilian population. In Bhutan, the regime has not only succeeded at using repression against the political opposition, but it simultaneously wields social policy, uses force, and controls information and ideas to produce a compliant citizenry. A compliant citizenry is valuable as it creates disincentives to the rise of future resistance groups that can threaten the royal government. Human rights violations, including the use of forced labor, should similarly be recognized as purposeful methods to induce social compliance in Bhutan. In Bhutan, the author has identified the high-intensity hard repression and low-intensity soft repression and use of force to deal with opposition, as delineated below.

**Hard Repression**
Hard, force-based repression crushes an opposition by the use and threat of violence. Hard, high-intensity repression continues long after the protests abate. Following arrest for demonstrating, many activists go to jail, a location of long-term hard repression. The regime uses an outdated penal system. The Bhutan government has used the following torture methods as a manifestation of hard, high-intensity repression:

*Severe beatings* with fists, rifle butts, canes, sticks, branches, batons, chains, and belts on the head, backs, arms, and soles of the feet of the activists with the aim to intimidate and get information from detainees about others. Prison guards reportedly change every hour, and with the change come new beatings to detainees in the prison. Prisoners are always fearful of beatings. Torture and beatings during interrogations have resulted in hospitalization and many deaths. *Forced fighting* between prisoners has been carried out for the amusement of the guards.

*Chippewa* occurs when the torturers stand on or press on a prisoner’s leg that has been tied or clamped with bamboo or wood.

*Sexual humiliation* including anal insertion with canes, being stripped naked and forced to walk in the prison yard in front of guards and their wives with weights tied to the genitals, and being stripped naked, tied, and beaten in public in the police courtyard in front of relatives and the public has been used to convince the general people not to support oppositions, “anti-national” groups, protests, and activities.

*Rape* of women and girls by the Royal Bhutanese Army, including repeated gang rape for at least a month at a time has been reported in large numbers.

*Stress positions* including being tied upside down and left hanging, being bent down on fingers and toes and beaten, and sitting cross-legged with hands and feet tied together.

*Denial of access* to lawyers and relatives and arrests without formal charges leave detainees wondering if they will ever be released or see their families again. Threats have been made by interrogators against detainees’ family and friends if “anti-national” activities do not end. This includes giving false information to detainees about the death, murder, or rape of a family member or claiming that a hole has already been dug to bury the detainee in.

*Forced marching* has occurred, when peaceful protesters have been arrested, tied, or chained in groups, and forced to march to prison.
**Irritant torture** is the application of irritants like chili powder and salt to body private parts, open cuts, or sores. **Denial of nutrition**, sleep, health services including the inability to bathe, sleep, eat, or drink water has resulted in disease and death. Prisoners report being offered urine in place of water and given rice mixed with glass or sand. **Social isolation and sensory deprivation** include being blindfolded, hooded, and kept in dark rooms in isolation from other prisoners and guards. **Hair torture** involves being dragged by the hair or having hair pulled out or burned. **Cold torture** involves forced exposure to extreme cold.

Convicts assigned to the prison camps engage in manual labor, including road and house building and logging work of royal family members, security chiefs and high-ranking bureaucrats, and other members of conservative elites. At time of this writing, it is reported that there are more than five hundred political prisoners in Bhutan. Since 1988, at least 139 political prisoners have died in detention, as a direct result of severe torture, denial of medical treatment or inadequate medical care, denial of adequate food, and so forth. For eminent and high-value dissidents like Tek Nath Rizal and the late Rongthong Kuenly, it has been reported that the royal government has used mind control techniques to torture mentally and monitor their activities.⁷

**Soft Repression**

The high-intensity force-based repression crushes an opposition by the use and threat of violence, “soft low intensity repression involves the mobilization of non-violent means to silence or eradicate oppositional ideas.” Ferree describes the soft repression as including the tactics stigma, silencing, and ridicule.⁸ The soft low-intensity repression has been extensively used in Bhutan to repress the dissidents and opposition since ages.

Violent repression by the state occurred in Bhutan after every large protest like in 1950, 1990, and 1997, which follows Byman and Lind’s argument that “authoritarian leaders use force to varying degrees in order to stay in power . . . force makes protest more costly.”⁹ Bhutan’s regime wields force against educated individuals and members of civil society to remind citizens of the violence that can be unleashed to punish noncompliance. Force is a compelling deterrent to ensure compliance in ordinary Bhutanese citizens. The regime’s ability to unleash violence, to know its citizens’ secrets, is meant to create a
citizenry too terrified to resist. The Bhutan government has also used divide and rule tactics against organizations, social groups, families, and at the individual level among the populace. These have created social and political engineering because of the government institutions of compliance. Political repression used against the opposition consists of stigma, silencing, and ridicule to eliminate the mobilized opposition. The regime also cultivates a compliant population through social policies, use of force, and control of information and ideas.

Structural and institutional methods used to cultivate compliance make it nearly impossible for ordinary Bhutanese citizens to have enough information or safe contact with opposition-minded individuals to engage in anti-regime behavior. A compliant population is deterred from joining the opposition. Thus, the question in Bhutan is not “why don’t people resist?” but “how and why those who do protests continue to do so under these autocratic conditions?” After 108 years of authoritarian rule, dictatorial regime is not a surprise in Bhutan, neither is repression against the political opposition. Less understood is the strategic basis for political repression or the institutions that ensure civil compliance and deter future activism in Bhutan, as conversed above.

In Bhutan, there is an “opposition movement” that encompasses a myriad of actors and organizations pressing for democracy and human rights persuasively since the 1950s. The coherence between the multitude of organizations, each pursuing goal and strategies, is limited. Differences exist, particularly between the nonviolent political opposition and those using sporadic armed violence to press claims, but several forums exist that attempt to address key divisions. It becomes necessary to examine how the activities of political activists might serve the purpose of countering the regime’s narrative.

Table 3.1 delineates the political power/democratic struggles/political repression templates in Bhutan.

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<tr>
<td>Zhabdrung</td>
<td>Killed/murdered/assassinated/poisoned</td>
<td>Social control on well-wishers, followers, and family members through human rights violations, stigma, silencing, ridicule, social isolation, deprivation through social policies, control of information and ideas,</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Nature of Repression</td>
<td>Social Control</td>
<td>Location</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharchop rebellion (1950s)</td>
<td>Capital punishment/the imprisonment/leader has been thrown alive into running river and brutally suppressed the movement; torture methods used as a manifestation of repression range from forced fighting, chepuwa, and severe beatings, to social isolation and sensory deprivation, denial, irritant torture, forced marching, denial of access, stress positions</td>
<td>Social control on family members and supporters in East through forced labor, human rights violations, stigma, silencing, ridicule, social isolation, deprivation through social policies, control of information and ideas, structural and institutional constraints</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lhotshampa rebellion (1950s)</td>
<td>Capital punishment/imprisonment/leader has been thrown alive into running river and brutally suppressed the movement; the commonly employed methods of torture include hair torture, cold torture, social isolation and sensory deprivation, denial, irritant torture, forced marching, denial of access, stress positions, sexual humiliation, forced fighting, chepuwa, severe beatings</td>
<td>Social control on family members and supporters in South through forced labor, human rights violations, stigma, silencing, ridicule, social isolation, deprivation through social policies, control of information and ideas, structural and institutional constraints</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic and human rights movement in South of Bhutan</td>
<td>Leaders imprisoned and brutally suppressed the movement; the torture methods employed as a manifestation of repression include hair torture, cold torture, social isolation and sensory deprivation, denial, irritant torture, forced marching, denial of access, stress positions, rape, sexual humiliation, forced fighting, chepuwa, severe beatings, and mind control techniques</td>
<td>Social control on whole country with absolute focus on Lhotsampas community in South; the soft repression included forced labor, human rights violations, stigma, silencing, ridicule, social isolation, deprivation through social policies, control of information and ideas, structural and institutional constraints</td>
<td>India and Nepal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic and human rights movement in East of Bhutan</td>
<td>Leaders imprisoned and brutally suppressed the movement; the commonly used torture methods as a manifestation of repression include hair torture, cold torture, social isolation and sensory deprivation, denial, irritant torture, forced marching, denial of access, stress positions, rape, sexual humiliation, forced fighting, chepuwa, severe beatings, and mind control techniques</td>
<td>Social control on whole country with exclusive focus on Sharchop community in East through forced labor, human rights violations, stigma, silencing, ridicule, social isolation, deprivation through social policies, control of information and ideas, structural and institutional constraints</td>
<td>India and Nepal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power struggle between Dorji family and king and conservative elites</td>
<td>Prime minister killed and brutally suppressed the movement; many of the people involved were given capital punishments</td>
<td>Family members of Dorji, well-wishers, and supporters; the soft repression included human rights violations through social policies, control of information and ideas, structural and institutional constraints</td>
<td>Nepal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political conspiracy and power struggle between Yanki family and</td>
<td>Leaders imprisoned and brutally suppressed the movement</td>
<td>Family members of Yanki, Tibetan refugees, and supporters. The soft repression included</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
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Mobilizing Resistance to the Authoritarian Royal Regime

The opposition movements do not unilaterally pursue the same goals; rather, the goals of social movements run the gamut from seeking policy change, inclusion in the current system, and seeking material or symbolic change in institutions or culture. The oppositions have dual imperatives of challenge and survival in a country like Bhutan. Under authoritarian conditions, the opposition must actively counter the attempts by the Bhutanese regime to eliminate dissidents and opposition. The constrained environment constructed by the authoritarian regime in Bhutan makes it unlikely an opposition would achieve its goal of regime change immediately.

Survival is a critical imperative of an opposition operating in an authoritarian Bhutan. This imperative leads to the pursuit of different strategies and tactics/activities by opposition groups operating in authoritarian Bhutan. The opposition groups in Bhutan use political activities to circumvent the regime’s repression and social control constraints. Activities signal in-group solidarity, transfer information to other facets of a political movement, build a sympathetic public, and provide rewards to ensure long-term participation. Political activities offer significant social support and allow activists to maintain their network. Political activities help to ensure that the political movement survives to continue its resistance despite the regime constraints.

The Challenge Imperative of Bhutanese Opposition

How opposition groups pursue their goals and imperatives is a matter of strategy. Armed resistance is a set of available strategies. Armed strategies include guerrilla warfare, conventional warfare, selective terrorism (assassination), and categorical terrorism.\(^\text{10}\) Nonviolent resistance presents another set of strategies. Nonviolent strategies “conduct the conflict by psychological, social, economic, or political pressure, or a combination of these.”\(^\text{11}\) Those who select nonviolent methods are not necessarily morally
opposed to the use of violence; nonviolent methods constitute a strategic decision selected when the conditions are not present for implementing successful violent resistance.

The empirical findings suggest that groups select violence when the relative returns favor it as a strategy. Other authors learn that violence is selected when groups are powerful, when the struggle continues for a long time or in the face of the increased use of violence by the state, to shock people out of complacency, to seize resources, and when the revolutionary (terrorist) groups lack sufficient followers or financial resources.

In the case of Bhutan, challenge imperative is “inclusive democratic Bhutan”—politically, economically, and socioculturally. The strategy is to challenge the royal regime through nonviolence institutional approaches. The opposition has adopted goal information strategy of protest and persuasion and used nonviolent interventions tactics and activities ranging from hunger strikes, sit-ins, speeches, pamphleteering to selective violent activities like targeting infrastructures, slow intensity bombings in public places, ambushing army personnel, and so forth.

**The Survival Imperative of the Bhutanese Opposition**

Besides the variety of challenge imperative strategies an opposition may select, resistance also includes the defensive, restorative activities undertaken by an opposition under authoritarianism regime. Successful resistance includes the survival imperative. Survival is a considerable achievement considering the repression and social control methods employed by the authoritarian regime in Bhutan. In the case of Bhutan, the survival imperative is to pursue consistently a goal of achieving “inclusive democratic Bhutan” with fundamental building blocks of opposition’s survival. The survival goal intervention is building sympathy of the Bhutanese people both in exile and inside the country. The tactics adopted include posters, pamphleteering, retention of membership of the opposition political organization, anniversary celebrations of political parties in exile as well as signaling solidarity attendance at other groups’ ceremonies, transfer information, speeches, and statements. Thus, to survive, the opposition in exile must counter the constraints imposed by the authoritarian Bhutanese government by building a sympathetic public, retention of members, recruitment of members, signaling solidarity with other opposition groups, and communicating policies and positions with members of opposition in and out groups. Oppositional activities in Bhutan reflect these elements.
The challenge and survival analytical framework developed by Beatty\textsuperscript{16} could be utilized to improve our understanding of how movements operate in repressive environments imposed by an authoritarian regime like the one in Bhutan. The two sides of the “resistance coin” play important roles in sustaining dissidents and opposition movements in Bhutan.

**Challenge and Survival Imperatives of the Bhutanese Opposition**

Resistance, in Bhutan and elsewhere, encompasses the offensive position of the challenge imperative and the defensive posture of the survival imperative. For individuals that decide to challenge their government, a continuum of political action strategies is available. Sporadic armed resistance is a set of available strategies undertaken by armed opposition groups to challenge the national government of Bhutan. Nonviolent resistance presents another set of strategies to challenge the regime. In Bhutan, as argued in chapter 2, people challenge the government using the strategies of exit, everyday forms of resistance, noninstitutional political action, and nonviolent political action.

**The Opposition’s Political Challenge to Bhutan State since the 1990s**

Challenge activities confront the authority of the governing regime; the authoritarian government and its entities are the primary audience, while other segments of society are secondary targets. To survive, the opposition must navigate the constraints to organizing imposed by the regime’s social control mechanisms. A singular focus on the challenge can lead to arrest, imprisonment, torture, or exile. It is not enough for an opposition only to challenge the regime. Successful resistance requires balancing both imperatives. There is no challenge out of obliteration, a concept clearly found in the repression and social control policies carried out by the Bhutanese government. Bhutanese opposition must also pursue the imperative of survival if it is going to be able to successfully challenge the Bhutan state. Certain Bhutanese organizations may rise and fall, some go underground when declared illegal, and others disappear to be replaced by new organizations of resistance. Nevertheless, an opposition remains to challenge the regime, despite the constraints of the authoritarian Bhutanese regime since the 1950s.

Survival activities, in contrast to challenge activities, are less public and target a different primary audience. The audience is members of the public, supporters of the regime, or members of the opposition. They serve alternative purposes than confrontation and enable the opposition to shore itself up vis-à-vis its more
powerful opponent. Survival activities ensure the opposition can return to fight another day by providing information to onlookers and opposition members. Challenge and survival imperatives are not mutually exclusive, and some activities serve both the challenge and survival imperatives; context of the activity matters. The challenge and survival imperatives provides a useful analytical framework to understand how opposition movements in Bhutan can survive over time, as well as the relationship between opposition activities and opposition durability under the authoritarianism Bhutanese regime.

Individual Bhutanese often discuss their efforts to ensure their personal safety and survival despite the risks they took opposing the regime. These accounts show how individual action buttresses the survival of the collective opposition. This line of reasoning provides an illustration of how the Bhutanese opposition challenges the government in contemporary Bhutan. Resistance in Bhutan challenges the state, but it also serves the imperative of oppositional survival. Despite the efforts by the royal regime to eliminate Bhutan’s opposition, protest continues in Bhutan. Bhutanese opposition political activities serve the challenge and survival imperatives of an opposition.

Regardless of whether rent-seeking behavior by the state reduces the potential for political opposition, authoritarian leaders in Bhutan will not give up power as long as the administrative and coercive institutions on which they rely remain intact. At the same time, authoritarian incumbents are constantly in search of ways to safeguard their rule from existing or potential opponents, a part of which entails careful attention to the institutional makeup and the trajectory of the state. In the process, they create, expand or contract, or change or altogether disband institutions of the state, some of which become significantly more difficult to change after they are initially formed. This deliberated institutional meddling, sometimes more overt and blatant than at other times, is one of the primary causes for keeping authoritarian regimes intact. The Bhutan government replicated the same stratagem to introduce a semi-authoritarianism system to preclude the opposition movement since the 2000s. State coercive power in Bhutan enhances incumbents’ capacity to suppress opponents and critics and defuse or preempt potential opposition movements through intimidation, cooptation, and deprivation of resources. In Bhutan, the government targets the political opposition with political repression while simultaneously cultivating a compliant public. Political repression occurs in the context of wider constructs of social control. The Bhutanese regime has vast repertoires at their disposal to deter citizens from joining political movements. Along with political repression,
the royal regime ensures social compliance through a combination of social policy, use of force, and control of information and ideas. A compliant citizenry is valuable as it creates social disincentives to limit the rise of future opposition. The exile opposition groups must remove and address these impediments in Bhutan for any successful movement in the future.

SHAPING PERCEPTIONS OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY ON BHUTANESE DEMOCRATIC STRUGGLES

Michel Foucault has changed the way to catch a glimpse of knowledge, at least among the more critical members of knowledge industry. Foucault exposed the capillary and incipient ways in which institutional powers are encoded in knowledge, manufacturing “governable” individuals or citizens/subjects out of raw human beings. If knowledge about ourselves, our natural, political, cultural, and economic environments, our ever-shifting relationships to these environments, and so on is not God-given, but rather a product of social construction, then it is most crucial that we know who are the key players in the construction process, whose interests are being served, marginalized, undermined, or diminished within what justificatory frameworks and how. In this section, I take a critical look at how expertise, “donor funding,” political power, and organizational influence of Western and outside entities operate in manufacturing perceptions of certain social realities on the ground and how the Bhutanese understand their own situation under the monarchy and reforms in Bhutan.

There are important policy implications that stem from this understanding of how social control and political repression affect recruitment, organization, and activities of Bhutanese opposition groups. The implications discussed here assume a continued policy of support for inclusive democracy by international governments. Considering only political repression, without considering the larger patterns of social control, presents inaccurate calculations of risk and irrelevant programs to promote the political transition in Bhutan. The Bhutan government has not been idle in the last two and half decades, and has instead consolidated its power; its royalists and conservative elite members enriched themselves from monies extracted from the state exchequer through corruption and land scams.  

The government purposefully creates a climate that does not tolerate political opposition. The challenges facing the Bhutanese opposition are grossly
underestimated compared to oppositions operating in democratic countries. The inaccuracy overemphasizes support only for challenge activities, when an opposition simultaneously needs support for its survival imperative. From this perspective, the presence of a multitude of opposition groups is not always a result of oppositional fracturing due to infighting or different visions. The multitude of opposition groups is the necessary diversification by people wishing to oppose the regime but who do not possess personal networks needed to join existing opposition organizations. While different perspectives within the opposition movement exist, the international community should not solely equate the mushrooming of organizations, mandates, and leaders in exile with disunity and fracturing. Oppositional plurality is in part due to the authoritarian conditions in which the opposition operates. The international community often emphasizes the number of individuals recruited and trained to be active opponents of the state. While cultivating new activists can remain an aim of interested democracy promoters, it is equally necessary to retain trained, talented activists. Support is needed to assist oppositional survival under authoritarian regimes in Bhutan.

Kanak Dixt succinctly describes the attitude and mind-set of the international community in Bhutan: “Aid agencies love Bhutan because here in the eastern Himalaya, at last, they have found the one country that might yet prove that the ‘development’ they propagate works. Here is a land that is exotic, backward, with a benevolent monarch, westernized bureaucratic elite, under populated, but with ample resources.” Throughout the period of increasing instability, Bhutan’s government has worked to shore up old allies and forge new ones as a means of obtaining impunity for its repressive actions. At the same time, it has made numerous claims of reform. These claims, however, largely ring hollow. The state’s ongoing use of torture, extrajudicial killing, arbitrary arrest, and excessive force as it continues to suppress popular dissent undermines the government narrative of reform.

Dixt further notes:

Yet, despite mounting reports criticizing, its multiple human rights abuses, including the “detention, abuse and torture of children,” the government has largely escaped international censure or sanction. Indeed, its leaders have increasingly tried to position Bhutan as a “beacon of democracy,” an “oasis of human rights,” and the “ideal gateway” to Himalayas. Millions have been spent on Western PR firms to promote this image. This mirage has proven appealing for many nations, who are drawn toward the tiny Kingdom for strategic reasons. The absence of significant public pressure from Bhutan’s allies, as they protect their commercial and strategic interests, has given the Bhutan political cover to continue its repressive practices. UN agencies, bilateral donors, and international NGOs regard Bhutan as a laboratory to prove their legitimacy, and the brochures they all bring out are tinged with wonder. . . .
“The aid agencies have great sympathy for the Drukpa point of view, not because what they are doing is right, but because their culture is threatened.” In the absence of resident embassies in Thimphu and the extremely controlled access to malleable media, the aid agencies are the world’s ears and eyes to Bhutan. Unfortunately, they are as well as deaf and blind. Too busy praising the activities of the Government, their influence on events in the south has been near-zero. An aid worker, who requested anonymity for fear of losing future contracts with an aid agency, accuses the Thimphu-based international staff of [the United Nations Development Programme], the World Food Program, [the United Nations Children’s Fund] and the World Health Organization, of complacency. “If someone in the staff drafts a report on the southern problem, it is invariably diluted before it is transmitted to headquarters. I cannot fathom why development agencies, whose mandate is the humanitarian, continue to act like ostriches.”

Now the question is why the international community has closed their eyes and ears to regime brutalities. Prospect theory, including the theory of relative gains, could be used to explain how neighbors and international organizations, as well as local organizations, become so compliant to the Bhutanese regime to the point of compromising the integrity of their missions and international credibility. The government allows international nongovernmental organizations and businesses to invest in the country, but then begins threatening to cancel permits and operating licenses, or to remove their access to populations in need of assistance. As organizations want to retain access, they become compliant to the Bhutan regime. Businesses also become compliant and supportive of regime policies for fear of losing their investments. Also, millions have been spent on Western public relations firms by the Bhutan government and embassies based abroad to promote the Shangri-la image and cover the atrocities committed by the regime at home.

Thus, providing international support that allows activists to continue their work, despite the risks, may be more significant in the long run. Future international assistance should consider ways to help political activists overcome personal impediments to remaining active in the opposition. Humanitarian support targeted to political activists will help them continue their work despite the regime’s repression. In addition, small-scale activities are a safer alternative to larger demonstrations. Except in the rarest occasions, small, decentralized opposition organizations cannot reasonably arrange large demonstrations.

Saying the Unsay-able: Why Do the Bhutanese People Fall Short in Supporting the Democratic Movement?

The history of democracy is a memoir of struggles. From its early beginnings in the late eighteenth century up to the present day, it has not simply emerged by virtue or chance. In almost every nation, the people fought for freedom and
democracy. The desire for independence and freedom, the urge to throw off the shackles of tyranny and oppression, were driving motives that mobilized the masses and eventually became forces, which so many ancient regimes all over the world could no longer resist; Bhutan is no exception. The Bhutanese people have an earnest desire to have an inclusive people democracy and not a royal democracy. During the process of liberalization, it might be expected that opposition groups, irrespective of their differences, would coalesce to achieve the one, common objective that stops them from operating freely: the institutional elimination of the authoritarian gatekeeper. As Pripstein-Posusney argues, “there is the paucity of comparative literature on opposition strategies under pseudo-democratic conditions, where façade democratic institutions often provide cover for the unaccountability and authoritarianism of the principal decision-makers and an analysis of opposition dynamics in Bhutan may reveal processes that the literature on democratization does not appear to capture. The specific focus of such studies is on cross-ideological cooperation between opposition actors. In this context, there is the theoretical expectation that under authoritarian constraint, opposition groups, irrespective of their ideological positions and policy preferences, would pool their resources to try to pressure the regime into reforming the political system because they all share the common objective of eliminating the authoritarian player to open up the political space. However, despite the common goal and abhorrence for the regime, the Bhutanese people fail to support dissidents and the opposition movement effectively. Several reasons may be identified for the failure of the people of Bhutan to support dissidents and the opposition movement today in capacious dimensions:

- Little knowledge, information, and influence about the organizations opposing the government inside Bhutan.
- The group of differing middle class and capitalists, a driving force of democracy is absent in Bhutan as the regime makes sure that no superfluous power nucleus develops to become a threat to the regime. Also, Bhutan witnessed an unconventional modernization and failed to create critical mass for regime change as premeditated in chapter 1.
- People fear the consequences and punishments from the government in the form of political repression and social control, as thought out above.
- Lack of education among rural masses.
• People are busy working for livelihood as more than 80 percent of the population is based on subsistence farming in rural areas.
• Difficult mountainous terrains and sparcely populated villages and districts to mobilize people for mass movement.
• Small community and a compact Bhutanese society makes it easy for regime to identify political troublemakers.
• Bhutan firmly embedded the state into its Buddhist heritage. In a traditional society like Bhutan, Bhutanese kings are considered as reincarnations of Bodhisattvas and Zhabdrung. Bhutanese people take the words and actions of their kings as expressions and affairs of Buddha himself. Because of his dual role as political and religious leader of Bhutan, disobeying an order from the king is both a civil and religious offense, punishable under National Security Act 1992. The king’s populist leadership also challenges any claims to be singular focus and representative of the Bhutanese people and politics. Cloaked under this image, the people of Bhutan would continue to regard the king as the guardian of the nation, and going against the king is beyond the imaginations of any ordinary Bhutanese. This has constricted the clout of parties to mobilize the people.

The regime has always pitted one ethnic group against another to suppress the movement and weaken it before it takes national character inside the country as the politics in Bhutan is a “triangular politics—Lhotsam-Sharchop-Ngalung.” For instance, when movement erupted in the South, the regime coopted with Sharchops and pitted Lhotsampas against Sharchops; when the movement burst in the East, they coopted with some of the Lhotsampas in power and pitted Lhotsampas against Sharchops. However, the ongoing democratic struggle belongs to all: Lhotsampas-Sharchops and non-ruling Ngalungs. The opposition movement could take a national character only in exile due to reasons cited above. Even in exile, the regime has successfully divided the opposition groups and physically eliminated some of the political leaders.

A number of reasons may be recognized for the failure of democratic movements in the 1950s in the body politics of Bhutan:

• Bhutan in 1950s was the dynastic despotism, where the civic and political rights of the subjects were not recognized, and there was no administrative structure to administer the public affairs.
• Due to the absence of an effective medium of communication such as roads, wheeled transport, print and audiovisual media, and prevalence of a universal
illiteracy, political agitation launched by the Lhotsampas/Sharchops was premature.

- The Lhotsampas/Sharchops never extended its activities among the Ngalungs, nor did the latter recognize the former as their own institution. Consequently, it remained exclusively a Lhotsampas/Sharchops political organization on the Southern and Eastern frontiers of Bhutan. Also, Ngalungs were reluctant to accord national status to Lhotsampas/Sharchops, as it was not considered respectable to associate with an irritant population.

- The Lhotsampas Bhutanese did not identify themselves with the cause of the groups at large. This was mainly because of their threatened and insecure status in Bhutan.

- Both Sharchopas and Lhotsampas perpetrated a blunder to identify themselves with India, which was considered by the Bhutanese rulers as a disruptive force in their affairs. This issue becomes clearer if one reads Zhabdrung–Gandhi episode of 1931 and the king’s reaction to the event.

- The Government of India, under the leadership of the Indian National Congress, was itself not sure in the early 1950s how much control it could have on Bhutan. Thus, the attitude of the Indian National Congress was ambivalent to the Bhutan State Congress/Sharchops to say the least. However, India was interested in stability of Bhutan, which meant a continuation of the oppressive dynastic rule. This was a major policy inheritance of free India from colonial rule in which discontinuation of the dynastic rule in Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan was considered inadvisable and against the larger Indian interests.

- The rulers of Bhutan were making all possible efforts to distance themselves from anything Indian and display its autonomy and distinctiveness from India as a strategy to claim sovereignty at an appropriate time. It was obvious that the efforts made by the Bhutan State Congress/Sharchops/Zhabdrung were to the contrary to the above-mentioned policy.24

Under pseudo-democratic conditions, where a degree of pluralism is introduced in the hope of re-legitimizing the authoritarian system, it is logical to assume the genuine opposition actors, irrespective of their ideological and policy differences, will coalesce, if only temporarily, to put pressure on the regime to accede to their demands for more democratic change. Thus, it seems legitimate to hypothesize that such circumstances would lead to identify the regime as the common, principal “enemy” in Bhutan. This would in turn be expected to lead to the creation of some sort of united front or umbrella organization to deal with the
ruling elites and negotiate or demand, depending on their strength, resources, and political agendas. This has been achieved in exile under the leadership of late Rongthong Kuenley, but third country settlement of Bhutanese refugees to the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia, and the untimely demise of Rongthong Kuenley have provided a setback to this united front. All this presents a significant academic puzzle and, at the same time, poses a challenge for domestic and international actors genuinely interested in and committed to democratic change in Bhutan. The absence of a significant degree of unity among opposition movements partially contributes to explain how the authoritarian regime in Bhutan has been able to remain in power despite the legitimacy crisis it may suffer. Thus, the reason for nonparticipation in Bhutan stems from the government’s purposeful implementation of social control and institutional and political repression designed to keep the Bhutanese people, as well as movement spearheaded by the fragile United Democratic Front, subservient.

**CONCLUSION**

The authoritarian government in Bhutan tries to eliminate opposition to its rule by using political repression and social control. An opposition’s imperative is to challenge the government using nonviolent or violent strategies of resistance. Resistance under authoritarianism utilizes all options on the continuum of strategies available to people. Resistance in Bhutan utilizes offensive and defensive approaches. Challenging the regime is not enough for an opposition in Bhutan. For an opposition to continue to challenge the regime, it must also survive the conditions of authoritarianism in Bhutan.

There is a need to adopt international policies to provide relevant support for political oppositions operating in these conditions. Survival is a key imperative of opposition movements; supporting nascent and ongoing opposition to authoritarian rule requires understanding the twin imperatives of challenge and survival. Fear of losing relative gains might explain how the Bhutan regime gains and maintains compliance over regional and international actors in Bhutan. The royal regime’s attempts at control do not end abruptly at its borders, and there are ways it attempts to ensure compliance from those outside the country as well. A regime also influences how people’s behavior outside of the country should be monitored to conform to the state’s expectations. Conformity occurs because of the state’s ability to inflict violence on individuals outside the county.
It leads to self-censorship and compliance even when not under the immediate surveillance of the regime.²⁵

However, if a state fails to trust its citizens and conflates the holding of diverse viewpoints with treachery, the greater danger is to the Bhutanese regime itself. It leaves the government looking paranoid, weak, insecure, and completely at odds with the image they have so carefully constructed in recent years. Bhutan is at a crossroads: it can choose between acceptance of pluralism or continuing repression, and its prospects for consensual domestic development rest on the outcome. King Jigme (K4) chose to embrace a “semi-authoritarian democracy” through deliberated political meddling, sometimes more overt and barefaced than at other times, to preclude the oppositions for instituting an inclusive democracy since the 2000s, as contemplated in the next chapter.

NOTES


6. This author held extensive discussions with Tek Nath Rizal from July to September 2012 in Kathmandu, Nepal.


18. For details, see chapter 4 of this book on corruptions and land scams.


20. Ibid.


Chapter Four

The Mirages of Royal Semi-Authoritarian Jigmecracy without Democratization

The end of the Cold War brought many political changes around the world. The failure of communism and the triumph of democracy put pressure on all authoritarian regimes to begin to democratize. To Jigme’s credit, he appeared to recognize the changing tide of the international political scene and understood that his techniques employed to suppress the people and stifle the opposition in exile were becoming internationally unacceptable. Monarchies have followed a very distinctive path to democracy, one which has its own rhythm and peculiarities. Political changes in Bhutan over the past few years, such as the introduction of a “Jigmecracy” with royal constitution, the retreat by King Jigme (K4) and the coronation of his son, formation of royalist parties, and state-controlled elections to parliament, have triggered two opposite reactions generally. One school has hailed the vision of the Bhutanese monarchy and its act of renunciation, and has declared the royal democracy story to be a success. Many others dismiss the transition as being a charade, claiming that the king still calls the shots and that Bhutan remains a tight autocracy. How could one explain the overwhelming change to semi-authoritarian royal democracy by King Jigme (K4)? If fear and direct manipulation played no major role, were the Bhutanese simply impelled by some authoritarian reflex deeply rooted in their traditional culture? What is the connection between this unendorsed articulation of political allegiance to the monarchy and the formal political process? And what does this tell us about the prospects for political change and democratization in a monarchy that claims to rule by divine right? Is holding state-controlled elections sufficient to claim a democratic polity?

Regardless of the type of definition of democracy applied, evaluating the character of democracy in a given country only provides an idea of what the state of democracy was at the time of evaluation. If one thinks of photography, such an evaluation provides a snapshot of a particular situation. If the character of democracy is evaluated several times over a given period of time, the research produces a result which is similar to that of a slide show: a series of snapshots.
The purpose of this chapter is, however, not only to provide a single snapshot of the disposition of royal democracy in Bhutan, nor is it limited to fabricate a slide show; rather, the aim of this chapter is to churn out something which resembles a series of short films. The focus is not only on a particular situation that can be depicted in a snapshot but also on the developments, the events, and the actions of various actors which led to that particular situation. The chapter takes into account this by embellishing the preemptive actions initiated by King Jigme (K4) and other issues in subsequent sections by examining in copious subsections the following attributes of Bhutan’s transition to democracy doubles: the coronation and kingly affairs; king and constitution; the royalists’ political parties and the challenge of legitimation; delimitation of constituencies; rebranding Bhutan’s monarchy by election; the bureaucrats, political elites and struggles for power; media and freedom of press; politics and violations of human rights in a royal democracy; civil society in Bhutan; and surfing the corruptions and land scams in the monarchical democracy to empathize the causes, deficiencies, and erroneous belief of democracy doubles in Bhutan. Thus, the chapter examines and dissects the vital signposts of royal democracy to figure out if such exists in Bhutan as claimed by royalists and the king. Taking this as the pedestal of argument, let me now move to explain first the preemptive measures to democratic political struggles and then the fundamental features of royal democracy.

THE MYTH OF ROYAL SEMI-AUTHORITARIAN JIGMECRAY

Vitali Silitsky concentrates on autocrats’ actions and policies, aimed at preventing a revolution in their domain. These policies, described by Silitsky as “pre-emptive authoritarianism,” take several forms: tactical preemption, that is, attacks on the opposition, the civil society, and their infrastructures; institutional preemption, which focuses on changing the fundamental rules of the political game to the incumbents’ advantage; and cultural preemption, the manipulation of public consciousness and collective memory to spread stereotypes and myths about the opposition, the West, and democracy in general. In October 2004, during King Jigme’s (K4) eight-day working visit to India, his principal secretary, Pema Wangchen, met the late Rongthong Kuenley at his residence in Delhi with a message that “he should return to Bhutan.” They discussed and covered a wide range of topics, including religion and the issue of refugees. His conditions for return from exile were the establishment of
“inclusive democracy under constitutional monarchy and legally ensuring of human rights.” But he received no further response. This means the end of the introduction of an inclusive people’s democracy in Bhutan. Philippe Droz-Vincent makes an argument describing authoritarianism as a control mechanism that uses a strategy of exhaustion of alternatives to try to channel change “within the regime.” He claims that:

the key to survival of a given ruler lies in the ability of the inner circle (his familial network, an “electorate” of high-ranking decision-makers) to provide and maintain the coherence of the entire system (the authoritarian equilibrated) either through material (privileges, corruption) or symbolic (positions in the state apparatus) rewards. Autocratic regimes can preserve their internal cohesion because important elites (military, security forces, political and business) play by the rules of the authoritarian game. Moreover, through political repression and de-participation of citizens, the authoritarian leaders have removed all alternatives from the system ensuring them a larger margin of maneuver.4

If we follow the aphorism of Philippe, then Bhutan can be an interesting case. In the midst of the festivities and celebration of coronation of a new king and endorsement of the royal constitution, pioneers and distinguished forbearers of the democratic struggle were legally excluded from participating in the so-called historical transition and celebrations. The conspicuous absence of these parties, leaders, and refugees raised questions of the genuineness of the democratization in Bhutan. The exiled leaders decreed that democracy in Bhutan is a farce and staged to delude the international community from the pressing political issues at home and the humanitarian crisis surrounding the one hundred thousand Bhutanese refugees sheltered in Eastern Nepal.5 Thus, Bhutan’s King Jigme (K4) and King Khesar (K5), in what can be thought of as a preemptive strike against democratic agitation, are staying one step ahead of what may have become a democracy-demanding population and are introducing royal democracy like a drop of water trickling down from above. Thus, reform in Bhutan is an “old wine in a new bottle.” The semi-authoritarian Jigmecracy is cosmetic surgery and preemptive measures to democratic political struggles.

The so-described king’s democratization in Bhutan has aroused international interest because of its unconventional nature. The king introduced it, supposedly without any pressure from dissatisfied elites or popular dissent, or normal explanations for democratization, and has been variously described as “democracy by decree,” “democracy from above,”6 “when agency triumphs over structure,”7 and more popularly in Bhutan itself as the king’s gift. Furthermore, the citizens of Bhutan were reportedly unenthusiastic about the political change, most preferring to remain under the existing political arrangements.8 Do the
above statements carry a grain of truth for Bhutan, or are they merely the
democratic rhetoric in an authoritarian state? Is royal constitution a real change
or more of same “old bottles with new labels”?

Gasiorowski graded measures of democracy to distinguish between non-
democracies in terms of the degree to which they have or lack democratic
features. The attributes of democracy can be found in Dahl’s notion of
polyarchy: elected officials, free and fair elections, inclusive suffrage, the right
to run for office, freedom of expression, alternative information, and
associational autonomy. Such a formulation is frequently used as the basis for
discussions of democracy and about whether, or to what extent, a particular
country or region is democratic. This perception is not persuasively espoused by
the features of royal democracy. Before delving into the other features of royal
democracy, it is imperative to comprehend the “coronation of king as
reincarnations of Buddha and Zhabdrung” to reflect the Buddha aura of the king
and their kingly affairs to unpack how traditional Bhutanese society views the
king and takes his words and actions as expressions and affairs of Buddha
himself and how the regime uses religion as a basis of legitimacy and the
organizing principle of authority.

THE CORONATION AS REINCARNATIONS OF BUDDHA AND
ZHABDRUNG AND KINGLY AFFAIRS OF THE WANGCHUK
KINGS

It is necessary to address the importance the state accords to religion and how it
realigns the administrative and political unit with the religion. This is more
germane to Bhutan’s case. How much weight or role has it given to Buddhism?
Do they simply take it as guide and inspirational ideal of authority, or as the
basis of legitimacy and the organizing principle of authority? Vatikiotis has
suggested that in a consideration of the relationship between the state and
religion, an important factor would be “the extent to which the state is
legitimized by a religious referent” and whether religion has an ideological role
in the creation of the political order. This close nexus readily implies that
religion can be a determining factor in the nature of the political identity of a
country like Bhutan.

The common misreading of the change in Bhutan is due to two predominant
misconceptions. Bhutan’s kings have perfected the art of simulating change
while ensuring that things stay the same. This smoke and mirror act has enabled
this Himalayan monarchy to maintain its stranglehold on power for centuries, and the most recently initiated royal democracy is to acclimatize to the global winds of change. The legitimizing influence of the monarchy through religion is discussion topic for people from all walks of life. The monarchy is undeniably an important institution in Bhutanese society. However, exactly what kind of institution is it, how much political power does it really have, and what are the means to legitimize the royal democracy?

The first of these, encouraged by official rhetoric seeking to justify absolute monarchical power, grounds the legitimacy of the monarchy in a paradoxical blend of Buddhism and religion. Michael states that the “monarch’s legitimacy values are essentially rooted in kingship, religion and customs.” Bhutan firmly embedded the state into its Buddhist heritage. According to this view, the king derives his legitimacy both from divine right, as a reincarnation of the Bodhisattvas just like in Nepal, where previous monarchs used to derive the legitimacy as reincarnation of Lord Vishnu, and from collective will. Sreeram notes:

The requisite for monarchs to stay on top is charisma based on religion. The kings of Nepal derive traditional obedience from the masses by virtue of the belief that they are reincarnations of the God Vishnu, one of the triumvirs of Hindu mythology. The Wangchuk dynasty ended a sequence of monk kings, but it nonetheless uses symbols of Bhutan’s Buddhist founders and is closely associated in popular imagination with Buddhist rectitude.

According to Buddhism, the Bhutanese concept of kingship is not only seen in the concept of Dharma Raja but in the belief that king is a “Bodhistta.” Thus, the constitution declares the “person of the king sacred and inviolable,” making obedience to him a religious duty and rendering all legislative, executive, and judicial authority subservient to his powers. To unfold and demonstrate more, one has to understand lucidly “symbolic empowerment and sacred enthronement ceremony” of the king and his coronation as the “Buddha and Zhabdrung.” This is underscored succinctly in the following.

The ceremony of receiving Dar on November 1, 2008, was not very long. King Khesar (K5) was ushered into the chamber of the Machhen Lhakhang along with King Jigme (K4) and Je Khenpo. They paid obeisance to the Zhabdrung Rinpoche’s Machhen by prostrating before it. As the father and son stood facing the Machhen, Je Khenpo Trulku Jigme Choeda faced them and offered the king a purification ceremony known as throesoel. Then the king walked up to the Stupa through a small six-rung stairway and received the sacred dar na nga. He was formally the fifth Druk Gyalpo (king). Je Khenpo then
conducted a brief concluding and dedicatory prayer. The three of them then left for Kuenra, adjacent to the Machhen Lhakhang, for the next ceremony of enthronement as cakravartin (universal king). Receiving dar from Machhen is the most important aspect of a king’s enthronement. It is the most sacred and secluded of enthronement events. Spiritual connection with founder of Bhutan, Zhabdrung Rinpoche was established. That was the actual moment of enthronement, of legitimacy and kingship. In a way, this ceremony establishes the king as the embodiment of Zhabdrung Rinpoche.¹⁵

The next important event was the enthronement of King Khesar (K5) in the image of a cakravartin. In a way, this was a very ceremonial enthronement. A cakravartin must not only be endowed with seven jewels or emblems of sovereignty, he must possess the thirty-two bodily marks of an enlightened being.¹⁶ If a king does not possess these marks, he is not a cakravartin.¹⁷ This problem is overwhelmed in Bhutanese context by the reproduction of an image of the Buddha in the king through the offerings. Once the representations of various aspects of the Buddha are offered, the body of the king becomes identical to the body of Buddha. Thus, he symbolically possesses the thirty-two marks of an enlightened being. King Khesar (K5) was then offered a series of precious materials. Je Khenpo came down from his seat to offer a set of three images of the Boddhisattvas of longevity called tshelha namsum. They consist of Buddha Amitayus (Tshepame), White Tara (Dorlkar), and Ushnishavijaya (Namgyelma).¹⁸ Then he offered a set of five materials representing the five Buddhas called Gyalwa Ringa. They consist of a vajra, a jewel, a lotus, a sword, and a wheel. By this offering, the king receives empowerment of five Buddhas. They represent indestructibility, wealth, beauty, wisdom, and dominion. The king was then offered eight auspicious materials known as Tashi Zegye. Each of these materials was presented to Lord Buddha during the course of his life. He blessed each of them as being auspicious. They consist of a mirror, medicine, curd, incense, a bilwa fruit, right-whorled conch, vermillion, and yellow mustard. In offering these materials to the king, his being is once again associated with the Buddha. After the king was transformed into a Buddha being through these sacred offerings, he was finally offered the seven emblems of sovereignty of the cakravartin. They consist of wheel of the Dharma, elephant of fortitude, horse of swiftness, jewel of fulfillment, queen of devotion, minister of wisdom, and general of valor. Besides what they symbolize, they actually represent seven factors of enlightenment: perfect mindfulness, perfect discrimination of phenomena, perfect energy or effort, perfect joy, perfect
versatility, perfect concentration, and perfect equanimity. The last set of symbolic offerings was the eight auspicious symbols called Tashi Tagye. There is another offering after the conclusion of the prayers of “Buddha Amitayus” (Buddha of long life). The king was offered a pill, a small serving of wine, and holy water blessed during the prayers. With a series of these symbolic offerings, the king is transformed into a cakravartin. The entire enthronement ceremony could be taken as a ritual for the king to become a “universal Dharma monarch.” The enthronement ceremony must now be completed with congratulatory offerings and good wishes.

Both the events of receiving dar na nga from Machhen of Zhabdrung Rinpoche and enthronement as Cakravartin took place in Punakha Dzong. This is symbolic of the spiritual significance of enthronement. These had established the legitimacy of kingship and the sacredness of the king’s being.

The crowning ceremony took place five days later, on November 6, 2008, inside the Golden Throne Room at Tashichho Dzong. In front of the golden throne, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck crowned King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck with the Raven Crown as the fifth hereditary monarch. This was the first time in a hundred years that a king was crowned by his predecessor.

The portrayal of the crowning was elucidated thus: “The crowning ceremony in Thimphu symbolizes the personification of His Majesty as Jarog Dongchhen, one of the three powerful protector deities of Bhutan, the other two manifestations being Yeshe Goenpo and Pelden Lhamo. Jarog Dongchhen, who is depicted with a raven head, is the compassionate and terrifying figure, whose wrath can demolish negativity that is obstacles on the path of enlightenment.”

The enthronement at Punakha Dzong established the king as an enlightened monarch. The crowning at Tashichho Dzong instituted him as the supreme protector that combines the duality of compassion and fierceness. Each king redesigned the crown, although the elemental feature of the raven’s head on it has been retained throughout. The golden throne with a huge wheel for the back rest is the main symbol of cakravartin. With the king wearing the Raven Crown and dar na nga, his being is inseparable from Zhabdrung Rinpoche and Jarog Dongchhen.

This religious link is protected in the royal constitution. Article 2 notes that the dual powers of religion and politics shall be unified in the person of the king, “who, as a Buddhist, shall be the upholder of the ‘Chhoe-sid,’” the traditional dual system of governance characterized by the sharing of power between the religious and political heads of the country. Given that the king embodies
religious and political authority, the common people worship him. Additionally, Buddhism is woven into the national fabric and is a state religion. When the king and Je Khenpo confer dar to anyone, they place it over the neck of the person receiving it. The conferring of dar by the king is an important element of formalizing and legitimizing office holders. When a distinguished person is awarded dar by the king, he is entitled to wear a scarf with different colors. Ordinary people wear white scarves and do not put on a sword as a mark of distinction. The king confers dar to ministers, who can then don a sword and wear orange scarves; he also confers dar to senior bureaucrats and judges, who wear swords and red scarves. Judges wear green scarves. Elected representatives were also granted dar, entitling them to wear blue scarves and swords. Article 17(1) of the constitution states that the king shall confer dar to the leader or the nominee of the party that wins the majority of seats in the National Assembly as prime minister. Similar provisions for awarding dakyen to the speaker of National Assembly and chairperson of National Council are stipulated in the constitution. This is robustly compatible with the view of Gandhi and Przeworski: “the force of tradition or legitimacy from religious or other sources may play a role in the survival of some rulers, particularly monarchs.” The cultural approach holds that Bhutan kingships enjoy traditional, religious, and tribal legitimacy, which induces exceptionally loyal support from the citizens. Meanwhile, the institutional approach contends that because kings organizationally stand above everyday politics, they can skillfully intervene in the system to spearhead controlled reforms that defuse public discontent. Dynasticism, wherein royal blood relatives monopolize key state offices, further helps to keep the regime intact.

Bhutan is the only country in the world which assumes that all citizens are Buddhist based on Twa-Wa-sum and the Gross National Happiness (GNH) philosophy, and this is the main tenet and is firmly embedded in the constitution. This is mentionable because the Bhutanese king is considered to be “Bodhisattva,” and religion provides the underpinning of his legitimacy and power. The coronation of King Khesar (K5) in November 2008 underwent various stages of secret empowerment, sacred enthronement, crowning, and public performances. Kuensel notes:

It was an enthronement of a cakravartin monarch, (stong ‘khor-lo’gyur-ba’i rgyal-po) in its mythical, spiritual, historical, symbolic and contemporary contexts. An exploration of these contexts above revealed how the universal Buddhist concept of kingship was realized in Bhutan within its own specific circumstances. Coronation of kings often appears ethereal, sacrosanct, secluded and unearthly. . . . Every monarch of Bhutan has received a set of five silk scarves called dar na nga which are coloured
white, yellow, red, green and blue from the Machhen of Zhabdrung Rinpoche in Punakha Dzong. They represent the five elements of earth, water, fire, air and sky (space). This is the same set of scarves that Desid Jigme Namgyel passed onto King Ugyen Wangchuck. Hence all the five kings of Bhutan received the same set from the Machhen. Receiving this scarf is the affirmation of Bhutanese monarchs as Dharma kings.27

It has been reported that “The Dar Na Nga” is preserved in the Machhen Chhorten, which holds the Kudung (physical relics) of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. It is returned to the Machhen Lhakhang in a chipdrel procession (Buddhist ceremonial procession) after the empowerment of the kings. However, it was brought to Machhen Lhakhang only on the eve of coronation. After the coronation, it is retained by the king in a special encasement.

Karvonen notes religion could be used to explain the logic of democratic rhetoric. Throughout history, rulers have used religion to justify their rule.28 The myth of Bhutan-style royal democracy is that the king, who has embraced “Western innovation” to fulfill its vision of the program currently, denounced liberal democratic ideas as un-Bhutanese, incompatible with country’s tradition and culture and, hence necessarily dangerous to the unity, stability, and prosperity of the nation. The kings of Bhutan have chosen to hide behind the thick smoke screen of cultural distinctiveness to justify autocratic rule, and assert the prudence of proceedings with deliberation, if at all, in the implementation of even the most limited democratic reforms.

Not only is the monarchy a representation of conservative ideology, but it is also dressed up in sacred robes, surrounded by mythology and protected by harsh authoritarian laws like the National Security Act of 1992. This is how the royalist prime minister glorifies the king: “As an indispensable traditional institution, the Monarchy is the symbol of Bhutanese nationhood, sovereignty and national identity. This is embodied in His Majesty the King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, who is the guiding light and unifying force for the country.”29

The grounding of the monarchy’s legitimacy in the eminent qualities of the king’s person detracts from the importance of popular institutional identification. And the oath of allegiance only intensifies that rupture because the ceremony has practically degenerated into a ritual exercise of personal power in Bhutan. In other words, it is the king’s persona, not the monarchy as an institution, which is validated as the center of the political system in official discourse. Tambiah notes:

In ideological terms, the traditional Buddhist ruler is no “constitutional ruler”; his actions are not periodically affirmed by “consent” of the governed or the allegiance of those who “share” power with
him. There are no “natural rights” grounded in human nature as such. The Buddhist formulation of kings is the upholder of Dharma, which exists as an eternal entity, and a correlative of its enduring and invariant nature is that individual kings represent it variably as human actors in accordance with their karma, and thereby experience different degrees of success in their reigns.\textsuperscript{30}

The more theoretical misconception relates to the rigid distinction often drawn between political allegiance to “traditional authority,” characterized as obedience to a person who embodies traditional values and modern political allegiance to a sovereign who embodies the collective will. According to this view, public attitudes that appear to legitimate the monarchical system are manifestations of either blind loyalty or fear. This view leaves no room for the possibility of direct popular validation or contestation of institutional political authority in a traditional political context.

Handler has given an entirely different account of the politics of the monarch. The monarch, like everyone else in a political society, is engaged in politics.\textsuperscript{31} However, the Bhutanese monarchy’s politics is not transparent but cloaked in the elusive aura of “Buddha and Zhabdrung,” placing the monarch beyond criticism and accountability. Thus, the king of Bhutan symbolizes the conservative ideology, which gives legitimacy to the authoritarian actions of the kings and their allies. It is a double act of “power and ideological legitimacy.” In the early 2000s, when the monarch was vulnerable to pressures for democratic reforms from opposition in exile, King Jigme (K4) emerged with more powers than his predecessors could have dreamed of but not because the people considered him holy or sacred. His victory was the result of ordinary politics: the political parties in exile failed to mobilize the Bhutanese from all walks of life based on clear programs. Nevertheless, the king as a political entrepreneur has combined religious nationalism with ethnicity in the rural areas to outmaneuver the opposition.

Blain and O’Donnell point out: “all societies inherit, reproduce and generate their own myths.”\textsuperscript{32} These myths, also called grand narratives or meta-narratives, constitute more or less coherent interpretative templates, one of whose main functions is to provide a celebratory and legitimizing account of the permanence and cohesion of societies. For example, the blind nationalism has prepared the Bhutanese to sacrifice their lives for the monarchy. With this philosophy, there is no room left for those who may think otherwise, especially for some who may question the monarchy’s place in politics. Over the years, the lionization of the monarchy by conservative and royalist elites has dangerously intensified. The king has become more than just the head of state. He is now “Buddha and
Zhabdrung.” The secret of a king is moral authority. As a highly moral figure, he
must not be violated. There is another persona of the king. The king is glorified
as “the king of the people and the father of the nation.” This is usually done
through public speeches on the eve of National Day on December 17, opening
and closing addresses in the parliament, and the birthday of the king himself.

Even the national flag symbolizes monarchy. The description of the national
flag as included in the constitution begins thus: “The upper yellow half that
touches the base symbolizes the political tradition. It personifies His Majesty the
King, who enhances the Kingdom. Hence, it symbolizes His Majesty to be the
upholder of the foundation of both the religion and politics.” In the national
anthem, the king is also referred to as “The Protector, who governs the realm of
monastic and civil traditions.”

Acceptance of a particular national identity would necessarily involve
participation in the community, sharing its religion, common heritage, and
history. Nation-building entails commitment to a faith and “the promotion of
selected practices and even the invention of new rites.” It is not unusual for
religion in Asia to form a basis of political legitimacy; as an illustration, Buddhism
in Thailand has long been utilized by rulers to legitimize their rule
and facilitate social control. Owing to the strong influence Buddhism has over
Bhutanese society, it is often used as a strong referent in the identity of the
nation. Apart from religion, monarchical regimes often consolidate fundamental
internal structures and institutions through the ritualization of cultural values and
primordial sentiments in order to neutralize aspirations for political change.
These concerns are central to the concept and practice of a state ideology. The
concept was formulated by officials close to the regime, who attempted to define
Bhutanese identity in terms of the people’s attachment to Buddhist culture, the
Buddhist religion, and loyalty to the monarchy. It is seen as an instrument of
legitimacy for the king’s rule by marry the conservatism of Buddhist values
with that of Buddhist culture and the traditional unifying role of the monarchy.
The king stated that the Dzongkha language binds the people together and is an
important signifier of Bhutanese identity. It is also suggested that the
monarchical system has become part of the heritage of Bhutanese. Braighlinnn
styles this legitimacy “from the distant past” and suggests that it is not unusual
for authoritarian regimes to seek legitimacy more through “some kind of origin
myth than popularly based ones.” In the past, the Bhutanese monarch and
particularly the queens of King Jigme (K4) have created genealogies tracing
their ancestry to reincarnations of Shabdrung. Seeking legitimacy through
historical continuity would necessarily imply continuity only with a “suitable historical past,” and often this continuity is largely fictitious. The political options available for purely secular leaders to sway monastic sentiment were always limited in a system where the highest theoretical authority lay with monks. But one particularly effective activity was the construction and restoration of temples and monasteries. They took patronage of Drukpa Kargupa monastic communities in Bhutan, which took various forms, particularly the renovation of monasteries and dzongs, commissioning of spiritual activities like publishing scriptures, reciting them, recruiting monk novices, building monasteries and installing statues, and sponsoring religious events. For instance, Kuensel notes: “The maternal grandfather of His Majesty the King, a descendant of Zhabdrung, has so far initiated and sponsored the construction of several lhakhangs, chortens and established various shedras, lobdras and nunneries.”

The Bhutanese identify the monarchy as a symbol of national unity and a legitimate form of governance. The king in his public speeches often uses democratic rhetoric to reassure both domestic and foreign audiences of his democratic position and views. Anyone who has ever visited Bhutan cannot fail to notice how this institution is celebrated everywhere. Pictures of the king and queen and other members of the royal family adorn dzongs, temples, and public and private buildings. Royal insignia are liberally used in diverse settings. Bhutan has numerous royal monuments, and there are many public holidays which celebrate this institution. The bookshops are full of books written about the kings and royal family. The Bhutanese are all taught at school that “the Monarchy has always been with Bhutan society,” implying that this is an ancient and unchanging institution. When the royal constitution was drawn up, it was “unanimously accepted” that the monarchy would not be touched. Today, it is widely accepted that the king is a benevolent monarch who takes a keen interest in all spheres of public affairs. Public perception is that “without the King, Bhutan would not exist.” In school and colleges, students are also taught that King Jigme (K4) gifted the Bhutanese people “democracy and a constitution.” The palace and government-supported domestic and foreign academic gatekeepers exaggerate the power of the monarchy, treating it as a “power block” in Bhutan politics, without looking at the role of modern monarchies in capitalist societies and their mutually benefiting relationships with other sectors of the ruling class and society. As the king had such high standing in the popular
imagination, he could persuade, apply pressure on, or even command citizens to accept anything that is “royal.”

Thomas Paine, in his *The Rights of Man*, rightly pointed out that: “the idea of any hereditary public positions is as inconsistent and absurd as that of the idea of hereditary mathematicians or poets. It is basically unscientific to think that the ability to be a Head of State is encoded in a person’s D.N.A.” What is more, Paine argued that hereditary succession presents the office in a most ridiculous light. If the monarchy can do no wrong, it cannot be held accountable for any actions, much like a young child. Paine went on to write that it is “an office which could be filled by any child or idiot. It requires some talents to be a common mechanic; but to be a king requires only the animal figure of a man.”

In Europe, those who support the idea of a hereditary head of state argue that it is a method of ensuring an institution that can rise above politics, unlike an elected president. At the same time, in order to avoid the problems highlighted by Thomas Paine, there is no longer any suggestion that the monarchs of Europe today are somehow superhuman “reincarnations of Buddha and Zhabdrung,” as we have perceived in Bhutan. They are regarded as ordinary average citizens who happen to be born to serve a particular purpose, and the institution is open to public scrutiny. However, in Bhutan, there has been an attempt to portray the monarchy as a magical and holy institution. Any institution that is not based on reality cannot survive for long. For long-term stability, there is a need to criticize the monarchy, making this institution open to unrestricted scrutiny. It is impossible to predict how this important institution will evolve in the future, but what is certain is that this ever-changing institution cannot carry on in the same way forever. Such a statement should not be cause for anxiety and fear. It is a challenge and an opportunity for all citizens to participate in reshaping Bhutanese society and politics for the common good. This represents a conservative ideology in Bhutan—religion and king, where the king symbolizes the soul of the nation, the head of religion, and the embodiment of all that is royal was central to preempt the democratic struggle and democracy from below. The fact that conservative elites are not committed to democracy means that they have to use religion and the symbol of monarchy in a more authoritarian manner compared to Europe.

**Semi-Authoritarianism Royalism: King and Constitution**

In order to be able to assess the quality of democracy, one should shed some light on major constitutional stakeholders in the political landscape of Bhutan.
Sonam Tobgye notes: “Democracy in Bhutan is truly a result of the desire, aspiration and complete commitment of the monarchy to the well-being of the people and the country.”

This short and simple statement made by a former chief justice of Bhutan after the signing of the country’s first royal constitution points to the nucleus of what might be one of the most astonishing and unique of Bhutan’s democracy witnessed by scholars so far. The change was a popular validation of institutional monarchical authority and enlightened royal autocrat.

The actual content has been intrinsically monarchist and thus antithetical to its outer look. This is what many outside Bhutan like to call “royal democracy,” where there is a semi-authoritarian democratic form of government with the monarchy playing a pivotal role in politics. Article 2.1 of the royal constitution says, “His Majesty the Druk Gyalpo is the Head of State and the symbol of unity of the Kingdom and people of Bhutan.” In order to understand how the new Bhutanese state conceptualizes itself, it is important to understand how the state is conceptualized in the persona of the king. Article 2.2 states: “The Chhoe-sid-nyi of Bhutan shall be unified in the person of the Druk Gyalpo, who as a Buddhist, shall be the upholder of the Chhoe-sid.” As a Buddhist, the king embodies both the religious (chhoe) and the political (sid).”

The king, therefore, is both lama and lord. The constitution carries forth an important political concept that informed the basis of village-based polities that characterized Bhutan from the ninth to seventeenth centuries as well as the ecclesiocratic and monarchical states, which developed subsequently.

Royal democracy has been birthed and constituted with a belief in Buddhism as the national religion, and nurtured and nourished by the network of royalists. Heywood warns that:

the existence of a constitutional monarch may contribute towards the violation of democratic principles as the head of state is not based on popular consent and is in no way publicly accountable. The monarchy then often symbolizes and supports conservative values such as hierarchy, deference and respect for inherited wealth and social position. The monarchy can thus become an impediment to progress because it binds the population to previous outmoded ways and symbols of the past.

The Constitution of Bhutan grants enormous powers to the monarchy. Article 2 prohibits the legislative assemblies from amending the monarch’s constitutional power. Article 20(7) provides authority to the monarch to sack an elected prime minister or his cabinet. Article 10(8) provides space for the monarch to send messages to the legislative assemblies. Article 10(12) empowers the monarch to convene extraordinary sessions of the legislative assemblies. Article 11 (1) (b) enables the monarch to nominate 20 percent of the total members of the National
Council, and Article 13 (10) and 13 (11) creates opportunities for the monarch to block bills even if unanimously passed by both the National Assembly and the National Council.

Article 2, sec 16, of the constitution specifically and without any ambiguities mentions that it is the royal prerogative of the king to grant citizenship and land kidu, including other kidus. Prime Minister Tsering Tobgay, in a The State of The Tsa-Wa-Sum, Third Session of Second Session of Parliament of Bhutan, June 2014, notes:

His Majesty’s compassion and “Kidu” has brought comfort to many who are destitute and underprivileged improving the quality of their health, welfare and education. In order that the people may have immediate recourse to their kidu problems, His Majesty the King appointed His Royal Highness Gyalsey Jigme Dorji Wangchuck as kidu in the Eastern Dzongkhags. Land kidu granted through the ongoing land reforms initiated by His Majesty in 2007 is helping to bridge economic disparity in rural . . . Bhutan and creating an equal stake in the country for all our people. His Majesty’s selfless giving to his nation—devoting all his time, strength and financial support to the welfare of his people and never expecting anything in return truly exemplifies the meaning of leadership, responsibility, duty and personal sacrifice. It is thus not surprising that His Majesty the King is affectionately referred to as the “People’s King.”

The paternalistic measures like developmental activities or special welfare programs such as kidu of land and citizenships have endeared the king to the rural masses. The king paid countless more visits to different parts of the country to make direct contact with the rural masses than the elected royalist prime minister. Such measures are not considered as the rights of the ruled and the duties of the rulers, rather as a sign of magnanimity on the part of the king. It has been discussed in previous sections that in a traditional society like Bhutan, the king commands so much respect that his words and actions are hardly ever criticized or dismissed.

The royal constitution and the outcome of the parliamentary election leave substantial power in the hands of the king and he remains in control of the political process. For example, after the election of local representatives, the king superseded the prime minister and called the Gup electorates to Thimphu all the way from different districts only to show the international community that the king gives all the directions to all parts of the government machinery. It thus made the prime minister free of any responsibility because, if the Gups were to be felicitated, it should have been done by the prime minister or the home minister, and not at all by the king. However, the democratic constitution of Bhutan has given the special prerogative under Article 2(16) (e) to the king to do anything which is not mentioned in the constitution. In a hectic way, the king
officially appointed the Gups with traditional “Dhar and Kabney.” Article 2 (16.a) states that granting of Dar to lhyenge and nyikelma is a prerogative of the king. The king’s prerogative may be delegated. Thus, the prime minister or chief justice could award dar on behalf of the king to distinguish civil servants or judges, respectively. Even the king receives a dar to formalize his coronation (Article 2.4). The king and Je Khenpo are the only two leaders who receive their dar from the sacred remains of Zhabdrung Rinpoche in Punakha Dzong. Like the king, the Je Khenpo also awards dar on occasions of promoting a member of the monastic community. He awards dar to all offices in Punakha and Thimphu as well as to lam netens or chief abbots of other districts. As a delegated authority, lam netens award dar to other offices of the monastic community in their respective districts.

Heywood states that in constitutional monarchies, the monarchy assumes a ceremonial function as in modern-day Europe. A constitutional monarchy offers a neutral, “non-partisan” head of state who is above politics. However, this is not the case in Bhutan. The monarchy is not a ceremonial figure and he performs ceremonial function as in modern-day Europe. Unlike Europe, the king in Bhutan could appoint and dismiss the prime minister and the cabinet by virtue of the constitution, which makes members of the government responsible to him and only secondarily to the parliament. According to other constitutional provisions, the king can dissolve the parliament, legislate during recess, and, before new elections are held, declare a state of emergency without explanation and revise the constitution by directly submitting proposed amendments to a national referendum. The king possesses formal veto power in the decision-making process, especially regarding the nomination of the leading posts of all the three branches of the Bhutanese political system. The king could also appoint all the district administrators, secretaries, directors of public agencies and enterprises, and district judges, as well as all the members of the high court and supreme courts and all constitutional bodies. None of these nominations are subject to approval by any other entity.

Civil-military relations are special cases for democratic theory, involving designated political agents controlling designated military agents. A fundamental premise of democracy, therefore, is that there is civilian control of the military. In a democracy, the hierarchy of de jure authority favors civilians over the military, even in cases where the underlying distribution of de facto power favors the military. All societies and political regimes must ensure that the military is subordinate to legitimate political decision makers.
institutionalization of the civilian control over the military is mostly shaped by a ministry of defense. That ministry is the organizational link between the democratic governance and the military that allows politicians to translate policy preferences into military commands.\textsuperscript{50} “The fully fledged civilian control requires that civilian authorities enjoy uncontested decision making power in all areas of defense and security policy while in the ideal type military regime the armed forces dominate political matters.”\textsuperscript{51} However in Bhutan, the army is not controlled legitimately by elected politicians or the institutions. There is no defense ministry, and the royal constitution has made the king supreme commander of the armed forces with significant influence on the top echelons. This means that there is no parliamentary oversight for the military, and the king owns the monopoly over the country’s most significant coercive force. Moreover, many high-ranking officers have matrimonial relations with royal family members. The king and the military enjoy a “symbiotic relationship” in Bhutan. They rely on one another to further their own objectives. The military needs the support of the king. The king needs the military to protect “the continuity of the throne” and “national security.” In the event that a threat is posed to either of two, the king will support the military to intervene on his behalf.

Heywood contends that monarchy acts as an embodiment of traditional authority and thus serves as a symbol of “patriotic loyalty and national unity.” The monarch also “constitutes a repository of experience and wisdom,” particularly with regard to constitutional issues that are available to democratically elected governments.\textsuperscript{52} The king’s actions are explained more by his conservatism. Conservatism stresses the perseverance of the old order that embodies the traditional values and customs of Bhutan. The king’s actions are guided by his sense of conservatism and divine right. The king sees himself as the father of the country, and therefore believes that he alone knows what is best for the people in the end. Many in the populace also see his role from this perspective.

The form of democratic skepticism creates significant resources for the king to maintain his role as the major agent, owning the last say in decisions regarding the promotion of change or in contrast maintaining status quo. The presence of both Article 10 sec, (7) in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, which states that the Druk Gyalpo (king) may address or sit in the proceedings of either house or a joint-sitting of parliament as and when deemed expedient, and sec. (8) of the same article, which states that the Druk Gyalpo may send messages to
either or both the houses as deemed expedient, are beyond the ordinary powers
or functions of any chief executive of any given country.

And just like any head of the family in any given Asian society possessing
Asian values, the monarch happens to be the guide as well as the custodian of
the nation, protecting the people from every crisis. One recent example suffices
to show that the king is an absolute power wielder in Bhutan. Kuensel notes that
in a recent Kasho (king’s order) to parliament: “His Majesty’s views on the land
ceiling will be included in the draft Land Bill of Bhutan 2012, and discussed in
this session.” This robustly indicates that the king can order the parliament to
incorporate his views in the parliament.

Thus, the king could use “royal prerogatives to influence legislative, executive
and judiciary power.” So, in virtual and implicit perspectives, Bhutan and its
political system are just like that of Nepal of the 1960s, where King Mahendra
introduced a political system with similar provisions in the constitution after
sacking the democratically elected government. Some critics believe that the
constitution, in fact, has given legitimacy to the king’s absolute power and that
this violates the very essence of the constitution.

Even if the constitution defines the Bhutan system as parliamentary, the system
is more like a semi-authoritarian system, given the prominent position of the
king, with the important difference that the head of state is not elected. However,
this trait in the Bhutan constitution stands out as being contrary to democracy:
the powerful formal role of the king, given that he is unelected. He holds, as we
have seen, legislative power, partly together with the National Assembly and
National Council and partly through royal decree, to be countersigned by the
prime minister and relevant minister(s). Indeed, he can veto any legislation,
since he must ratify and promulgate all laws. What is more, the king has
extensive power over parliament, since he decides on its dissolution and when
elections are to be held. He further has the ultimate executive power, exercised
through the prime minister and ministers endorsed by him and sitting at his
discretion. The king has the ultimate powers regarding all relations with other
countries. His powerful position is further underlined by the fact that ministers,
National Assembly and Council members, and all constitutional heads and chief
justices swear by Lord Buddha to be loyal to him before taking office. Thus, it
can be established that the constitution itself cannot be regarded as democratic.
There is, then, in practical terms, no room in Bhutan for opposition to the king.
The democratic shortcomings evident in the constitution are thus even more
pronounced in practice, given the king’s all-pervading role. In this sense, “The
King plays the central and controlling role in all aspects of the exercise of constitutional authority to a degree that dilutes the concept of separation of powers” envisaged in the constitution. Furthermore, other structures in the political system, in addition to those laid down in the constitution, form part of the royal power—namely the royal court and the security forces. The royal court plays a key role in defining government policy as well as launching initiatives, while the security forces have substantial influence in determining political priorities. These two structures are directly subordinated to the king and are organized in ways that are concealed from the public gaze. Thus, it appears to be widely regarded that Bhutan has three competing branches of executive government, all headed by the king: the Cabinet of Ministers, the Royal Court, and the Security. Sonam writes:

Parliamentary democracy in Bhutan is therefore, the modern embodiment of monarchy. For the Bhutanese king to remain a mere constitutional and ceremonial figurehead will be detrimental to the cause of Bhutanese polity. It was neither desired by the people nor envisaged in the Constitution. Therefore, the King along with the National Council and National Assembly constitutes the Parliament. What this means is that all bills will become laws only upon royal assent being granted after the two houses deliberate on them either separately or in a joint sitting. The King as an alternative source of law is not new to Bhutanese politics. For example, the Third King was the author of most laws codified in the 1950’s, which collectively came to be known as Thrimzhung Chhenmo. The Fourth King continued to issue royal ordinances in addition to laws passed by the National Assembly on important socio-economic and political issues. Although the king’s role as part of the law-making process is reformulated in the Constitution, he remains an important agency in the legislative process.⁵⁶

Under the National Security Act of 1992, it is treason to speak against the king, people, and country. Many people who were involved in criticizing the king and the government were jailed and eventually convicted under this act. There are reports that hundreds of such political prisoners are languishing in Bhutanese jails, even after the establishment of royal democracy.⁵⁷

It must be mentioned that among the Bhutanese political elites, there seems to be a firm support for the form of “royal dictablanca,” that is, soft authoritarianism under the leadership of the king. This is convincingly corroborated by statement of a former royalist prime minister: “If instability to develop, . . . then I would imagine that the people will look up to the king to provide remedies. . . . Country’s experiment with democracy remains a fragile work-in-progress, and admits many Bhutanese would still look to the monarchy in a time of crisis. Democracy is new to Bhutan. What it will bring to the country and how it evolves is something that we are uncertain about.”⁵⁸ It is clear that Jigme Thinley’s acquiescence that the future of semi-authoritarian royal democracy is uncertain in Bhutan has to do with the existing power structure and
the institution he had worked with. From the constitution itself, it is surreptitious in Bhutan as to who is actually still at the helm of power. Thus, Bhutan has attempted to form a new kind of royal democracy revolving around the prerogatives of the king. In other words, with the end of absolute monarchy, their other characteristics have lived on and are well conserved. The legacy of absolute monarchy—social and political ideology, historical knowledge, cultural intellect, discourses, and monarch institution itself a unit—now have deeply entrenched in the absolute monarchy. However, upholding the role of the monarch as the “epitome of Bhutan life” is like a double-edged sword and contributes negatively to the political development of Bhutan. This incessant, histrionic glorification and sacralization of the monarchy have served as toxic cell that prevents the Bhutanese from expressing unconventional thoughts. Thinking outside the box has been forbidden simply because it threatens the position of the conservative network of monarchy. Those who violate the convention of Tsa-Wa-Sum are often punished with the spiteful and inconsiderate punishment leading to life prison or exile. As a part of survival tactics of the royalist and elitist class, they have proclaimed that country must revolve around what are perceived to be the true component constituting Bhutan—Tsa-Wa-Sum. This is meant to ensure the longevity of the vestiges of the absolute monarchy. Any criticism of governance is directed to the prime minister, while all snob appeal is showered on the king.59 Thus, the royal democracy is more a “Jigmecracy: an old wine in new bottle or old Jigme with new labels.”

Eva Bellin argues that, “authoritarianism has proven exceptionally robust in the Middle East and North Africa because the coercive apparatus in many states has been exceptionally able and willing to crush reform initiatives from below.”60 This points to the efficiency of the regime in Bhutan of stifling opposition, which, weakened by constant repression, is therefore unable to make coherent demands because it is first and foremost preoccupied with its own survival. Thus, the Bhutan monarch makes the first move: one common denominator in Bhutan has been the preemptive measure taken by the king to avoid being marginalized or overthrown. By offering cosmetic political reforms, the king has been successful in weakening the opposition in exile. The new constitution appears to be a defensive move. Siegfried tells us: “The political observers tend to either recognize this as an idiosyncratic Bhutanese style democracy or to condemn it as a cunning strategy of the ruling dynasty to stay in power.”61 Still, the king keeps a huge influence on his country’s destiny: his possibilities to
influence the lawmaking process, his powers in the selection process for candidates of constitutional offices, and being the supreme commander of the armed forces. The constitution has many shortcomings. The constitution, by proclaiming the king is the “supreme representative of the nation,” makes the king, not the people, sovereign, and this translates into sweeping political power.

Thus, at present there are two conflicting views of monarchy in Bhutan. The normative and structural view of the monarchy explains that monarchy has made contributions to Bhutan, mainly to unite all Bhutanese to preserve territorial integrity. However, this is a disputable issue now as we have witnessed how the longest tenure of some autocrats has attributed to their overwhelming monopoly of force. The same is true for Bhutan. It is true that many long-surviving autocrats headed some of the most repressive regimes on Earth: Stalin remained in power for thirty-one years and Mao ruled over China for thirty-three years, and each was responsible for millions of deaths. Bhutan is no exception to this as it has witnessed one of the world’s biggest and most unnoticed ethnic cleansings in history under the reign of King Jigme (K4), where one-sixth of its population was driven out of the country to live in exile in India and in refugee camps in Nepal.

The critical perspective view of the monarchy states that the almost unrestricted power of the king, encapsulated within the protective wall of Tsa-Wa-Sum and the National Security Act of 1992, has produced a more decisive position of the monarchy. The royalist elites are viewed as having glorified the king’s power at the expense of national interest of Bhutan. The royalist elitist in collaboration with the conservatives and the media has consistently painted a somber picture of the political dominion as tainted by anti-nationalism. From this point of view, the end of the absolute monarchy does not insinuate really the end of monarchy power. The new dispensation has given birth to a new political culture in which the monarchy and its defenders have collectively asserted their legitimate right to interfere in the politics, even if when their actions are in reality no less immoral. Anderson contends that:

The introduction of democracy was considered to be the consequence of rejecting the monarchy. Monarchies are antique . . . democracy is the sole surviving source of political legitimacy. Serious monarchy lies transverse to all modern conceptions of political life. Kingship organizes everything around a high center. Its legitimacy derives from divinity, not from populations, who after all, are subjects, not citizens. Such logic posits that the modern nation-state must necessarily succeed kingdom.

It argues that the kingdom is untenable in the [twenty-first] century as a political entity.
However, this ghost of absolute monarchy continues to stalk Bhutanese political life in the present day. Kinga notes:

What continues to be reflected in the Constitution is the concept of interdependence personified by the King. The King not only unites in his person both the political and the religious, he is also the protector of all religions in Bhutan. Moreover, he will also appoint the Je Khenpo on the recommendation of the five lopens. Earlier, both the Desid and Je Khenpo derived the legitimacy of their office from Zhabdrung Rinpoche or from his reincarnations, who served as heads of state. The founding of the monarchy in 1907 resulted in the location of sovereign powers in the King. His authority as the head of state was no longer derived from the reincarnations of Zhabdrung Rinpoche. He became the sovereign, and all authorities thereafter flowed from the throne. The king did not replace the Desis and reigned alongside the Je Khenpo. Rather, King Ugyen Wangchuck became the sovereign, and endowed spiritual authority to the Je Khenpo. In parliamentary democracy today, the king has become the symbolic source of political authority. With the re-location of sovereign powers in the people, they elect the government and the Prime Minister. The King however, would formalize the offices by conferring dar to the Prime Minister and cabinet ministers.

One thing for certain is that the monarchy is here to stay as the Bhutanese king enjoys two types of prerogatives: formal and informal, as deliberated below.

Under formal prerogatives, the king possesses significant veto powers in the decision-making process of the leading posts of all three branches of the Bhutan political system. Therefore, there is no doubt that the policy formulation and implementation will remain under the control of the monarch. Furthermore, he remains the supreme commander of the armed forces with significant influence. Due to the fact that there is no parliamentary oversight over the military, the king still owns the monopoly over the country’s most significant coercive force.

Under informal prerogatives, the sociocultural and royal legacy has generated and is still generating a tremendous mechanism of informal influence for the king. The form of democratic skepticism creates significant resources for the king to maintain his role as a major agent owing the last say in decisions regarding the promotion of change and reforms or in contrast maintaining the status quo. Viewing him as the guardian of Bhutan development and the people’s well-being makes it very unlikely that the monarch will perform only symbolic functions today or in the near future.

The monarchy may have given up insignificant power on paper. Even though the king announced the constitution, closer analysis suggests that in reality, the king may not have surrendered much power because the political parties of the royalist background still appear to be unwilling or unable to play a decisive role. This could lead to stalled reforms or to an uprising again, if extra political organization including in exile mobilizes successfully. The time for Bhutan’s political change was deliberately chosen; there is instability and serious crisis in
the country, but the royal family believes that they have the people’s trust. The reform process has been intentionally chosen as it could still remain under the control of the governing elite. This motive is evident from the king’s opening speech of the constitutional debates: “Bhutan, through good fortune and fate, cannot hope for a better moment than now for this historical development and will never find another opportunity like this. Today the King, government, and the people in all sections of society, enjoy a level of trust and fidelity that have never been seen before.”

It came as no surprise that the political parties shared a strikingly similar political platform—a continuation of the monarch’s policies. The first and second democratic elections of Bhutan were not contested, for it lacked real alternatives to the existing discourse. As the former royalists and monarchists take their place as camouflage democrats, King Wangchuck’s system of governance, public policy, and official discourse will carry on. The people of Bhutan continue to regard the king as the guardian of the nation. All sources in Bhutan confirmed that the present king is still the supreme ruler. Perhaps this is why: both the ruling and the opposition, excluding exile groups, are die-hard royalists and monarchists. In 1990, paranoid about the “anti-national,” the king appeared to condone the growth of democratic movements; GNH today is helping the “Image Making Machine.” This has led the Western diplomats, academicians, journalists, and others to bite their tongue and refrain from criticism. The monarch in Bhutan has taken steps to appease the people and preempt the opposition in exile and to placate demand by unfolding narrow reforms that give people the only limited voice in the system. These reforms have preserved the throne and conversely gained acclaim at home and abroad. The message concerning the power of the king is more ambiguous. This is being done to determine where the palace can maintain the process of change, shape reforms as it sees fit, and avoid the pressure from the opposition in exile. In general, the constitution reserves three crucial areas: religion, security, and strategic policies (executive, legislative, and judicial) choice as the king’s exclusive dominion unless it is challenged by royalist political parties or an extra opposition party in exile. Nevertheless, this is very incredible in Bhutan as all parties are royalist and vocal opposition is based in exile as well as there is hardly any political culture to deal with opposition in Bhutan. In verity, expression “opposition” is a taboo in Bhutan. These royalist parties are another side of the same coin—palace—and have no intention to defy the king as challenging the king insinuates they will lose their own status and privileges.
The king has cleverly won the first round of reform war. He has successfully positioned himself and preempts radical reforms. The king has avoided any serious challenges to his authority and has given the country a royal constitution that looks good on paper for international consumption but does not force him to surrender any power. His principle legitimacy remains intact, in fact much stronger than pre-2006 as it is just zero sum game and only win situation for the king.

King Jigme (K4) protected his throne from an infectious democratic movement by reconfiguring the political stage through a carefully calibrated reform agenda. To some extent, these changes have increased the Bhutan monarchy’s political legitimacy. They have allowed it to engineer its own version of the reforms and keep centrifugal forces in check, for now. To those who have accepted the monarchy’s reforms, some change, even if it comes from the top, is better than none.

At least superficially, the king has provided a good lesson on how even limited top-down reform, if delivered cleverly as a zero sum game, can preempt pressure for a more drastic change from the bottom in a society, where people are not politically conscious in traditional society and have lived under the culture of top-down political channel. The same model of “Jigmecracy” has been adopted by many Arab rulers after the Arab Spring in 2011, particularly in Morocco. Despite the wishes of the Bhutanese people or the international community, the king has so far quashed or neutralized pressure for fundamental political changes. Bhutan controls and stunts these instrumentalists that contribute to the success of a broad-based domestic opposition. It cracks down on political opposition, coopts potential ones, and indoctrinate masses to create compliant and loyal subjects. Fernand de Varennes notes:

Bhutan has moved in 2008 towards a defensive ethno-religious, even racial, the concept of the state. The new Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan and the country’s legislation unambiguously serves to reinforce what in many respects can be considered a rejection of minorities and diversity and enshrine measures that continue the systematic violation of many of the basic human rights of the country’s minorities—especially the Lhotshampas and Sharchops. The concern in maintaining the political ascendance of the Drukpa at all costs and of preserving Bhutan as a Buddhist enclave in the Himalayas has unfortunately led to this small kingdom’s having in place some of the most racially discriminatory laws and practices in the modern world.66

The constitution is only ancillary to the monarch. The king retains virtually all significant powers: he may promulgate law, appoint a prime minister and dismiss the government, dissolve parliament, suspend the constitution, and bypass parliament with constitutional amendments. It is forbidden by law to
publish an article offensive to the king and the royal family, and it is illegal to inquire into royal finances. Criticism and public debate are not permitted. As a practical consequence, certain subjects like refugees and criticism of royal family members are politically taboo. Predictably, the most controversial and politically compelling issues lie beyond the tolerable limits: to talk of refugees and opposition in exile has been considered treason; open debate about Buddhism or limits to monarchical power are similarly ill-advised. Any breach of the tacit code of consensus constructed around Tsa-Wa-Sum places people in an unwanted category. Sonam Kinga contents that: “King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck will hereafter, be the guardian of Bhutan’s Constitution and hence, parliamentary democracy. Bhutan’s distinct historical journey towards democracy has been spearheaded by her kings. Democracy did not develop from opposition to the monarchical state. The monarchy gave birth to democracy. Hence it legitimates democracy.”

The king’s first address to the parliament in 2008 afforded a valuable inkling that he is the supreme ruler and if parliament falters, he will take the lead. This also symbolizes the subservience of the so-called elected parliament to the king and not to Bhutanese people. The king commands that:

As a democracy’s first government, you have the responsibility of setting the right examples, laying strong foundations and promoting the best practices of democracy. We, the people and King, have complete confidence and faith in the new government. As long as you work to serve the country and people, you will have our full support. If you should falter in your service to the nation, then the duty to counsel you also rests with the people and the King.

Parashar in “Bhutan’s Road to Democracy Leads to China?” asserts that:

As the world’s largest democracy, India welcomed Bhutan’s transition in 2008, but not everyone in South Block realized that the proposed model wasn’t like India’s Westminster model of parliamentary democracy. It’s a diarchy in Bhutan with the monarch retaining overriding powers.

For instance, Article 20.7 of Bhutan’s constitution says the cabinet shall be collectively responsible to the Druk Gyalpo (the king) and to parliament. The government must also enjoy the confidence of the king as well as parliament. Further, Article 20.4 says “the [prime minister] shall keep the Druk Gyalpo informed from time to time about the affairs of the state, including international affairs, and shall submit such information and files as called for by the Druk Gyalpo.”

Thus, in the current moment of popular support and enthusiasm for the monarchy, the new king may be tempted to bypass weak political institutions and parties, and become an “enlightened autocrat.” If this is the case, the new
political order in the post-2008 period has witnessed the rise of royal democracy but only on the surface.

Fernand notes:

heralded with great fanfare in the country itself as a modern, forward looking accomplishment set to help propel Bhutan towards a democratic society, the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan is—from the point of view of International Human Rights Law—a deeply disturbing document. While at first glance the Constitution may appear to be in harmony with international human rights treaties since many of its provisions seem to guarantee fundamental rights associated with these treaties, a closer examination reveals that on the contrary, it is intended to exclude vast segments of the population of Bhutan from being able to enjoy even the most basic of human rights in an attempt to ensure the dominance of certain ethnic groups—and the exclusion of others based solely on their ethnicity. All in all, this unfortunate constitutional aberration—seemingly welcomed in the West—makes the Land of the Dragon anything but a Shangri La.69

The above discussions reveal that the royal constitution is only supplementary to the monarch. The king retains virtually all powers. The royal constitution been introduced mainly as a self-protective measure to preserve and maintain the power of throne.

The Royal Constitution of Bhutan on Minorities

The official position of Bhutan does not recognize the existence of any ethnic or linguistic minorities. Despite this official position, it is undeniable that Bhutan is a home to different religious, ethnic, as well as linguistic minorities. Arguably, the constitution of Bhutan is not comprehensive enough to address the various aspects of the legitimate rights of minority groups. The constitution guarantees certain rights for each and every citizen of Bhutan. These general rights have significant bearing on the protection of minorities. The fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution include the right to freedom of speech, opinion, and expression; the right to freedom; the right to equal access and opportunity to join the public service; freedom of association, including the right not to be compelled to belong to any association; equality before the law; and safeguards against discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, language, religion, politics, or other status.70 The constitution provides that the state shall endeavor to preserve, protect, and promote the cultural heritage of the country, including monuments, places and objects of artistic or historic interest, Dzongs, Lhakhangs, Goendeys, Ten-sum, Nyes, language, literature, music, visual arts, and religion to enrich society and the cultural life of the citizens.71 According to the constitution, Dzongkha is the official language of Bhutan, though it is mainly spoken by ruling elites. The constitution does not pledge that any section of the citizens
having a distinct language, script, or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same. The constitution also does not allow religious and linguistic minorities to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. The constitution does not further provide that linguistic minorities have the right to be taught and have instruction in their language at the primary stage of education. The constitution of Bhutan declares Buddhism as the state religion. The constitution of Bhutan has codified GNH precepts. The Buddhist ethical foundation of the Bhutanese constitution has not ensured the inclusion of the Lhotsampas and other minority groups in the political and cultural life of Bhutan.

If the constitution is inherently an ideological text, then whatever ideology the constitution is based upon becomes the point of agreement between all the constituents of the state upon ratification. In the constitution, a cultural privilege is given to the Ngalung and Buddhists of the country in an effort to promote a national culture, one of the main pillars of the GNH. The Bhutanese constitution, in its assertion of a “nation’s culture,” has assumed a single, unified Bhutanese heritage. This has marginalized other ethnic groups in the country, particularly the Lhotsampas in the South.

I argue for the lesser significance on the Buddhist ethical underpinning of the Bhutanese constitution to ensure the inclusion of the Lhotsampas and other minority groups in the political and cultural life of Bhutan. Article 7, sec. 15 states that “All persons are equal before the law and are entitled to equal and effective protection of the law and shall not be discriminated against on the grounds of race, sex, language, religion, politics, or other status.” Article 3, sec. 1 serves as an important articulation of Buddhism’s commitment to GNH as regards religious matters. While it is certainly essential to demonstrate the Buddhism’s role in the “spiritual heritage” of the country and to express Bhutan’s commitment to Buddhist values, the primarily Lhotsampa Hindus and Christian minority in the country must also be considered a part of the spiritual heritage of the country.

Citizenship rights are dealt with Article 6 of the Bhutanese constitution. There are some critical aspects of the constitution which restrict citizen rights. The constitution knows three types of citizenship. Only the natural-born citizens shall enjoy all rights within the political system. The other (citizenship by registration and citizenship by naturalization) are not entitled to take part in all aspects of public life, by way of example, especially with respect to constitutional offices. This concept, in fact, suggests different classes of citizens. This violates the
principle of equality, which is an important basis for the concept of democracy. The current citizenship requirements in the constitution reflect changes in the citizenship laws instituted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, where requirements became stricter in order to limit the Lhotsampa population. If “all persons are equal before the law and are entitled to equal and effective protection of the law and shall not be discriminated against on the grounds of race, sex, language, religion, politics, or other status” as in Article 7, sec. 15, and if “a Bhutanese citizen shall foster tolerance, mutual respect, and spirit of brotherhood amongst all the peoples of Bhutan transcending religious, linguistic, regional, or sectional diversities” as in Article 8, sec. 3, then the language requirement for citizenship should not belong in the constitution. Both sec. 2 and sec. 3(c) in Article 6 aim at restricting Bhutanese citizenship in the name of preserving national culture.

The disposability and the social construction of citizenship are illustrative of the delicate relationship that often exists between a state and its citizens. These cultural deficits and eugenicist perspectives purported by the leadership have without doubt contributed to the negative stereotyping and discriminatory practices against Lhotsampas and other ethnic minorities. Thus, it can be said that the constitution of the Bhutan is not sensitive to the concept of minority rights. Moreover, the non-discrimination right of the constitution does not guarantee protection against discrimination on grounds of religion. Furthermore, freedom of expression is not recognized as a fundamental right in the constitution. Various discriminatory laws constrain the citizens to profess and practice any religion other than Buddhism. In reality, the constitution has given certain rights but these constitutional rights have been restricted and truncated by several royal laws and bylaws. All these laws are preordained to deny the rights of minorities.

The Royalist Political Parties and the Challenge of Legitimation

The voters use party labels and platforms as cues or shortcuts, and parties may be evaluated based on their past performance, either in government or in opposition. Main Wary argues that table democracy in a plural society requires political parties to be an agent of democratic transformation.\(^{73}\) Political parties make democracy workable. For voters, parties make democracy workable by providing critical information about what candidates stand for and how they can be expected to govern.\(^{74}\) Where parties are weak or poorly institutionalized, voters are often confronted with the plethora of parties, many of which are new and will be short-lived. Voters must go over the merits and positions of dozens
and even hundreds of individual candidates. In such a context, it becomes virtually impossible to evaluate the parties retrospectively, associate candidates with known labels or ideologies, and differentiate among candidates. Parties also make democracy workable for politicians. Politicians are, of course, self-centered and shortsighted creatures. Left to their own devices, they have little incentive to think beyond the next election or their own electoral district. Consequently, politicians potentially confront a variety of coordination and collective action problems, both in their pursuit of public office and in government. Parties are critical to solving these problems. The only way collective responsibility has ever existed, and can exist, given the institutions, is through the agency of the political party. Because they exist beyond a single election and must compete on a national scale, the parties develop longer-term priorities and broader goals than individual politicians.

In summary, political parties are essential to achieving, maintaining, and improving the quality of democracy in a country like Bhutan. Where they are weak, class actors tend to have a lesser stake in electoral politics, legislatures are less able to oversee the executive, anti-system candidates are more common and successful, and societies are poorly equipped to either resist authoritarian encroachments or remove autocratic governments. If we follow this dictum, then Bhutan has no such sumptuousness of having numerous strong parties to choose from except royalist parties with almost identical ideology with strong allegiance to the king, and they are mostly formed by former royal bureaucrats.

Bhutan’s king tried almost every ruse in the legitimation book to maintain his authoritarian rule. Like other authoritarian rulers, he tried to establish the obedience worthiness of the political order, he had constructed. The king’s populist leadership challenged the party claim to be the sole focus and representative of the Bhutanese people and politics. Autocrats are more likely to survive in cases where there is a single highly institutionalized ruling party with a salient ideology or revolutionary tradition, and an extensive and well-funded coercive apparatus. In such cases, incumbents are likely to remain more cohesive in the face of opposition challenges and more likely to be able to beat back opposition mobilization. The manifesto of parties reads like this: “We offer our unwavering allegiance to the sacred institution of monarchy, the life-force of our nation . . . dedicate ourselves to realizing the vision of the Fourth Druk Gyalpo, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck . . . and shall be guided by His Majesty the King, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, in our pursuit of Gross National
Happiness.” The manifesto asserts that the party’s stated goal and guiding principle is to realize the dream of the monarchy and not of sovereign people.

The attempt to strengthen the monarchy has been carried out by royalists and by the king himself, who has always been an active monarch and will continue in future. Thus today, the king has reinvented himself as a benevolent ruler who has gifted democracy to its people. However, all aspects of absolute monarchy have been merged into a new political order, and they seem to be irreconcilable with the modern value of democracy such as popular mandate and accountability. Thus, in the future, the real challenge to the legacies of the absolute monarchy is not really opposition in exile or so called anti-monarchy movement, but the hyper-royalist parties themselves who have failed to face the new reality in politics. Thus, it is not incredulous to witness the rat race competition to open new political parties. The Bhutanese regime rules through a “patron-client network.” Today, the elite in Bhutan consists of royalists and traditionalists with familial legacies tied to serve the royal family. An authority in traditional autocracies is transmitted through personal relations: from the ruler to close associates and from them to people to whom the associates are related—by personal ties resembling their own relations to the rulers. The longer the autocrats have held power, and the more pervasive they have personal influence, the more dependent a nation’s institutions will be on the king. Without him, the organized life of society collapses like an arch from which the keystone has been removed. This purports that neither Bhutanese society exists without the king’s supports nor will political parties subsist and survive. It was alleged that Sangye Nidup, King Jigme’s (K4) brother-in-law, actually structured and headed the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) in its initial foundation period. But, when the king’s father-in-law’s relationship with the people worsened due to his materialistic desires, the king wanted Jigmi Y Thinley, also a royal relative and president of the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT), to form the first government of the royal democracy. Moreover, the members of the PDP were mostly amateurs, while the DPT was manned with virtuoso former ministers, ready to continue what was left at the time of transition from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy. The king put his faith in the DPT; hence the landslide victory of Jigmi Thinley’s party. This time, however, the PDP’s victory has a different narrative, hidden in the fabric of the royal place and its invisible influences through institutional structures to command the common people to vote for PDP and turn down the DPT.
In a democracy, an effective citizen is expected to take an interest in public affairs and to possess a sense of “internal political efficacy” (i.e., “beliefs about one’s own competence to understand and to participate effectively in politics”). Weak political parties have made mass mobilization the anathema. Political consciousness has traditionally been very low among the general Bhutanese populace. The ideas of deference and consensus continue to play a larger role in this traditional society than the ideas of efficacy and ideology. This restricts any criticism of governmental policies. Moreover, the method of election curtails any scope for free deliberation.

Political scientists contend that if an authoritarian state adopts elections and other democratic institutions—even in a limited way—at some point, the institution will fire.” All competing parties largely follow the king’s view as they are staunchly royalists. Foremost among these views was to continue the king’s blueprint of GNH. It has become difficult to flag an independent “ideology.” There is no ideology the population adheres to—liberal, conservative, or populist. Therefore, the defining nature of political parties easily becomes the personality of the leadership/leaders, which may not be healthy in the long term. Bhutan requires a strong multiparty system with independent ideology and not just a two-party system.

It is difficult to form political parties. The DIPD Mission Bhutan Report states that with the rules and regulations established by the constitutions as well as an election act, it is clear that setting up new party is very demanding and requires a lot of courage from those taking the initiative—it should not be a surprise, then, if new parties have a difficult time surviving. This could create an unfortunate tradition of new parties being established before each election or institutionalization of two parties only. If we look at the manifestos of the two parties now represented in parliament, it is difficult to come to a very clear conclusion on what exactly makes them different. There is no decisive programmatic difference at all. The consequences are that the defining features of the parties end up being their leadership, or the individual leading the party. This spotlight on the personalities can become dangerous, if it overshadows the substance of what the party represents. It is only the clash of ideology that helps shape public policies in the public arena. The ideology of all political parties seems blurred, and they are more confined to pursue the policies and programs of the king. Today, Bhutan is in the hand of ad hoc rule by royalty favored “Good Men.” Previously, Jigme Thinley and now Tsering Tobgay are the epitome of this, and they do more than anyone else to foster the idea of the
king’s being near divinity. Today, the king is the real owner of the political system, whereas the prime minister and his coterie is a replaceable jockey. All the parties are state political parties and are supposedly funded by the state even though it is unconstitutional. State funding connotes control of Bhutan politics by the regime.

Another factor that could be adduced to explain what the media and some academics have come to label the “Bhutanese exception” is the existence of a weak and divided opposition, detached from the population and active only for the duration of electoral campaigns. The opposition has not been evolved into a real, political force. The weakness of the political process in Bhutan can be attributed to three factors: a built-in constitutional bias in favor of the king at the expense of the parliament, as conversed above; a royal regime–controlled electoral process; and ineffective and inept democratic parties headed by royalists.

The system does not make it easy for a healthy party system to survive. All parties can run in the primary round, but only the two getting the most votes can compete in the general election. Universal suffrage was granted, but the principle of political pluralism was not established in the constitution, which outlawed the multiparty system. The electoral process was manipulated to maintain allies in government. With weak parties, the elections do not suggest a democracy. Even former Prime Minister Thinley accepts that the king is expected to play a more influential role than might be unacceptable from other constitutional monarchs. However, even the most revered of king worship by the royalists as “Bodhisattvas” is not immortal, as cogently reflected by the demise of kingship in neighbors Nepal, Iran, and Afghanistan.

Parties cannot run for the National Council or local government positions, only for the National Assembly seats at the national level. The Bhutan party system is totally divorced by law from the daily life of the common people. Local government election is a race among individuals, and candidates are not allowed to be a member of a political party. The election commissioner of Bhutan noted: “A big challenge to the election administration is how to ensure that the local government doesn’t get entrenched with political party activist as many of the former party members now occupy the local government positions.” The same is the case for a candidate running for the National Council seats.

In a democracy, the political parties form the backbone of the democratic system, both at local and national levels. The reality is that neither the ruling nor the opposition party has a party structure in place, which is able to perform the
most basic functions of a traditional political party. The party structure is very weak. This is partly due to lack of resources to maintain a minimum structure. This is reflected in the membership, which has plummeted dramatically. Out of 378,786 registered voters in 2008, only 27,735 were of DPT and PDP membership combined. Today, five royalist political parties together have 1,824 registered members across the country. This is a drop by 617 members in just one year. There were 2,441 members in 2013. With the current trend, there are only about two registered members per one thousand people or thirty-nine persons per constituency. Records with the Election Commission of Bhutan show that the DPT, the largest party in the first election, had 75 members, whereas the PDP had 309 active members as of February 2015. The membership of newly formed parties Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) is 634, followed by Bhutan Kuen-Nyam Party with 429 and Druk Chirwang Tshogpa with 377. These statistics portray a disconcerting trend as old royalist parties are losing registered members to newly formed parties. However, this is consoling for the king as no strong parties would come up in Bhutan to challenge the power and position of the monarchy. Kuensel claims that: “Whether parliamentary democracy will actually work, with parties being broke, has been a point of interest to Bhutan watchers. If the party machinery cannot exist through party offices and workers all across the country, how can the party ever survive and function, apart from in name?” However, the constitution makes it impossible for Bhutan to emulate this model. Section 17 of Article 22 of Bhutan’s 2008 constitution states that “a candidate to or a member of the local governments shall not belong to any political party.”

The Bhutanese have a close relationship with their locality. Parties get a lot of political energy and oxygen from being active at a local election, where parties deal with the daily issues that are very close to the heart of the people. However, parties are prevented from engaging actively on the issues people are most concerned about. It connotes that they are denied access to the political energy and oxygen that can make party manifestos live, concrete, and vibrant as well as attract loyal members or groom new candidates. This indicates that the royalist parties are strange constructions and don’t reside in the hearts and minds of ordinary Bhutanese people. The strict restrictions on the formation of political parties in Bhutan in the constitution’s Article 15 are also inconsistent with international law and the global human rights regime.

Given that the political system continues to be dominated by political parties with ties to the royal family, it appears unlikely that the assembly will resist
many of the policies and proposals favored by the king.\textsuperscript{87} The political parties in Bhutan are too weak to bring about democratic change. While the king contributes to their weakness, they also suffer from two problems of their own making: an ideological wavering between royal nationalism and democracy, and the structural inability to fulfill their function as mechanisms of mass political integration and representation. It is difficult to imagine how monarchists and royalists could push for serious constitutional and electoral reforms without themselves undergoing far-reaching ideological and structural transformations to become “democrats.” Bhutan today lacks liberal democrats to create the domestic constituencies with a state in adhering to democratic norms and strengthen democratic forces vis-à-vis autocrats. At the ideological level, they have to adhere to the modern democratic principles that they advocate and acknowledge that social conflicts, cultural diversity, and political divergence are the natural components of any free and open society. Covering up these differences by appealing to “authentic identity and national solidarity” as they have done in the past simply denotes a delay in confronting the root of the problem. Like the story of the emperor’s new clothes, the conservative royalist political elites have relied on telling the Bhutanese people and the international community in order to promote their own agendas. However, most see that the emperor has no clothes. The political parties don’t hold Bhutanese society together. At the structural level, the modernization of communication and recruitment methods, the renewal and discipline of party cadres and leadership, and the reorganization of local and national branches are necessary to improve the operational capacity and the image of the political parties. Without legitimate, modern democratic mechanisms, the monarchy remains the “supreme legitimator” of the political process. Most of the parliamentarians represent the elite and are dictated by the elitist agenda. Thus far, they have demonstrated little vision for the long-term future of the country; if there is any disappointment in the system, it is more in the political leaders of the country than in the system itself. Bhutanese political culture places truth in the hand of the few, and the common man is distrusted and considered a dependent, irrational being, a “cog in the wheel” not capable of making independent judgments and choices. This is cogently corroborated by the statement of the former prime minister: “Democracy came not by the will of the people, but by the will of the king.”\textsuperscript{88}

The ideology of semi-authoritarianism democracy with the king as head of state is a strange mixture of traditionalist concepts of kingship and democracy. The
King is the symbol of order, place, and intent; acts as the focal point of the loyalty of political parties (not otherwise seen in democratic countries, where political parties are the pivot of order, place, and intent); and acts as a web to bind the people. Randall and Svasand suggest a number of factors contributing to current party weakness that include contextual factors (cultural and economic conditions), microlevel explanations (the role of political elites), and institutional explanations (the structure of the state and its institutions). The king adopts depoliticization and suppression techniques and tactics to weaken political parties, particularly operating from exile. Vitali Silitski notes:

in Post-Soviet countries’ hard-line authoritarian regimes ensure their continued stability and survival not just by sporadic reactions to already existing political and social challenges, but by preemptive attacks that eliminate threats before they arise. Preemption aims at political parties and players that are still weak. . . . Although these actions may destroy the regime’s democratic image abroad, the public at home may still perceive its leaders to be duly, if not fully democratically, elected. By uprooting political and social alternatives well before they develop into threats, incumbents can remain in power.

In Bhutan, the regime has actively weakened and repressed opposition through a variety of methods, including banning, imprisonment, threats, torture, and in sporadic cases, the assassination of their leaders. The monarchy has sought to “swell and fragment” the opposition by creating rivalry and tension within the parties in exile. On the eve of the second general election, there was a rat race competition to create more parties with similar ideological backgrounds vying for the power inside the country.

Gunther and Diamond’s classification of political parties provides useful knowledge for understanding the types of political parties in Bhutan. They have identified five broad kinds of political party: elite-based parties, mass-based parties, ethnicity-based parties, electoralist parties, and movement parties. Elite-based royalist parties have continued to dominate Bhutan.

Bhutanese monarchs are political arbitrators and leaders of Bhutanese politics. The monarch draws from several sources of political support: the legitimacy of the royal family and its inherited rule, a unique relationship with religion, and historical legitimacy. Consequently, as Richards and Waterbury claim, the monarch is not responsible to, nor dependent on, popular support to legitimize his rule. For the monarch, then, political division and competition in popular politics, not unity, is the basis of stability. Kings have no interest in creating a single contender who could vie with them for power. As Richards and Waterbury explain, what the monarchs want is a plethora of interests, such as tribal, ethnic, professional, class-based, and partisan, whose competition for
public patronage they can arbitrate. None of these elements can be allowed to become too powerful or wealthy, and the monarch will police and repress or entice and divide.\textsuperscript{92} Bhutanese monarchs exacerbate divisions among various groups in the population, such as those between nationals and anti-nationals. The palace also encourages divisions among groups to keep them weak and divided in future. Amid the fragmented parties, political discourse tends to focus on trivial issues rather than on demanding accountability from the monarchy and questioning the uneven power distribution. This fragmentation creates a political atmosphere that is not conducive to building opposition movements. The original optimism surrounding the democracy has largely dissipated. What remains is a compromised two-party monarchist system that presents little opposition to the monarchy.

During controlled liberalization in Bhutan, monarchs remain above the fray of politics, but they need to promote their indispensability to the political system. As Brynen and others conclude, what is interesting about the monarchs is that they appear to be in a position to establish many of these rules and to thereby act simultaneously as both interested players and far-from-impartial umpires in the political reform process.\textsuperscript{93} Bhutanese monarchs thus began political liberalization by reinforcing their supremacy. The kings continued liberalization by shaping a system in which they allow competing groups to play the political game and thus remain absolutely indispensable to the system. Monarchs want balanced, competing royalist blocs. Thus, Bhutanese monarchs prefer electoral rules that divide political power across royalist political parties and promote society’s dependence on the monarch for arbitration and stability. In the early stages of liberalization, both monarchs and elites in Bhutan can benefit from electoral rules that disperse political power. When opposition elites or even royalist groups become stronger or more unified including in exile, monarchs may attempt to thwart liberalization.

In stark contrast to Western legislatures, parliamentary opposition of any kind is absent in Bhutan. Hence, Bhutan’s real opposition is always extraparliamentary and is based in exile. New parties emerge quickly in liberalizing states because other parties are also “new” and thus not guaranteed a large percentage of the vote; past electoral records are new or of limited information in highly volatile systems; voters are not strongly affiliated with parties, other than the ruling party; and civil organizations and associations (civil society) are weak and do not concentrate support behind any particular parties.\textsuperscript{94}
Thus, in Bhutan we can see political institutions spearheaded by liberals or the conservative royalists.

**Liberals:** The liberals are primarily young people with Western education aspiring to modernize the country. The liberal makes a number of common demands such as the full constitutionalization of the monarchy, a multiparty system, the creation of an elected parliament, the termination of discrimination against minorities, and improved redistribution of wealth. The liberals include all three ethnic groups. They are based inside Bhutan and in exile. The liberal opposition is divided. Its fragmentation into various groups and unorganized individuals render it almost irrelevant in the present circumstances, as they are mostly based in exile and royalists call them anti-national.

**The Conservative Royalist:** This includes royalists and conservatives who constitute a ruling group in Bhutan. Their key demand is stricter adherence to Twa-Wa-Sum, the National Security Act of 1992, and the GNH policies. They express concerns about the disregard for so-called Bhutanese values, and they rebuke any Western shows and criticize any non-elites and anti-nationals. Moreover, in less specific terms, they insist on the “Bhutanization” based on “one nation one people policy.” The group is the power wielder in Bhutan today.

Tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 give an idea about the Bhutanese political parties based in exile and in Bhutan with their respective positions on the monarchy and Zhabdrung.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Name</th>
<th>Ideology</th>
<th>Date of Registration/Registration Number</th>
<th>Position on Monarchy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Druk Phuensum Tshogpa</strong></td>
<td>In pursuit of Gross National Happiness through growth with equity and justice</td>
<td>February 10, 2007/ECBDERPP07100202</td>
<td>It is a royalist party, so they favor an active monarchy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>People’s Democratic Party</strong></td>
<td>Gross National Happiness as guiding philosophy</td>
<td>January 9, 2007/ECBDERPP07090101</td>
<td>It is a conservative and royalist faction, so they support an active monarchy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The DPT and the PDP were created in 2007. In March 2008, the DPT won a landslide victory in the first general elections ever held. In 2013, after winning the first round by a large margin (44.5 percent against 32.5 percent by the PDP),
it suffered a defeat in the general election (45.1 percent against 54.9 percent to the PDP) and only obtained fifteen seats in the National Assembly. Both parties are considered conservative and royalist factions.

In 2013, three new parties—describing themselves as center-left and social-democratic—were registered by the Election Commission.

Table 4.2. New Political Parties Formed for the 2013 Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Name</th>
<th>Ideology</th>
<th>Date of Registration/Registration Number</th>
<th>Position on Monarchy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan Kuen-Ngym Party</td>
<td>It is a people-centric political party, promoting social democracy</td>
<td>Applied for registration on October 30, 2012. Registered as political party by the Election Commission of Bhutan in January 2013. March 1, 2013/ECB/DER/PP/130010303</td>
<td>King as powerful, active monarch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa</td>
<td>Anchored on values of freedom, justice, and solidarity, where each individual is fully enabled to pursue dreams and fulfill potential</td>
<td>Applied for registration with the Election Commission of Bhutan on December 10, 2012. Registered as political party by the Election Commission of Bhutan in January 2013. January 20, 2013/ECB/DER/PP/13012005</td>
<td>King as powerful, active monarch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


DNT: Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa With 17.04 percent of votes in the primary round, it finished third and therefore could not participate in the general election. It claims to be the people-centric political party, promoting social democracy.

Druk Chirwang Tshogpa: It obtained 5.9 percent of votes in the primary round. To minimize inequalities of income, concentration of wealth, and promote equitable distribution of public facilities among individuals and people living in different regions of the country is one of its objectives.

Bhutan Kuen-Nyam Party: This party was disqualified from participating in the primary round, following a controversial ruling by Bhutan’s Election Commission, due to a lack of candidates in two constituencies—a common problem among political factions, considering the strict rules on eligibility, especially the requirement to hold a degree. Bhutan Kuen-Nyam Party has, among its objectives, the promotion of an egalitarian society without class distinctions, the eradication of poverty, and fostering of stronger ties with India.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Name</th>
<th>Ideology</th>
<th>Established on</th>
<th>Party Position on Monarchy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan National Democratic Party</td>
<td>Inclusive multiparty democracy</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Constitutional monarchy with multiparty democratic system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Druk National Congress</td>
<td>To establish a parliamentary democracy in Bhutan: to declare Bhutan a multiethnic, multilingual, indivisible, independent, and democratic Buddhist constitutional monarchical kingdom and secure and guarantee to all its citizens fundamental rights, including the rights to equality, freedom and justice, irrespective of their religion, race, sex, caste, creed, tribe, or ideological conviction</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Constitutional monarchy with multiparty democratic system or Zhadrung system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan People Party</td>
<td>Inclusive multiparty democracy</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Constitutional monarchy with multiparty democratic system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist)</td>
<td>They call for the start of a people’s war and a new democratic revolution, and the declaration of Bhutan as a “sovereign democracy.” They also want to turn Bhutan into a republic.</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Republic with no monarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan United Socialist Democratic Party</td>
<td>It strives to establish socialist secular federal republic democracy and empower the people as the supreme power to decide the future destiny of the country</td>
<td>April 16, 2012</td>
<td>Socialist secular federal republic democracy without monarchy, and the incarnation of Zabdrung should be installed as the rightful ruler</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Author’s personal tabulation; manifestos of political parties.

Several political parties, like the Bhutan National Democratic Party, the Druk National Congress, and the Bhutan People Party, are based in exile and are banned from participating in the election process. Other smaller parties and organizations also operate from exile like the Bhutan Democratic Socialist Party, the Bhutan Gorkha National Liberation Front, the Bhutan National Congress, the Bhutan National Party, the Bhutan Tiger Force, and the Bhutanese Movement Steering Committee.
The above tables reflect that Bhutan has political organizations with differing ideologies and distinctly diverse perspectives on the monarchy and Zhabdrung Rinpoche. The development of various political parties has exhibited a number of significant trends, which will probably interfere with the future political development in Bhutan. Four likely scenarios can be mapped out based on existing information: the multiparty democratic scenario with the king and real opposition from exile; the liberal scenario with the king, opposition from exile, and new political parties; the risk of royalist fundamentalism with the king and present royalist parties; and the risk of emergence of new political system with Zhabdrung Rinpoche, opposition from exile, and new political parties inside Bhutan.

On August 26, 2010, Bhutanese political parties in exile formed an umbrella group to pursue a “unified democratic movement” under the leadership of late Rongthong Kunley Dorji, president of the Druk National Congress. The group opened office in Kathmandu, Nepal, in November 2010.

Political parties are regulated under the constitution of 2008. The constitution sets forth a party system under which two parties at a time occupy either ruling or opposition positions in the National Assembly. All government bodies are nonpartisan and not affiliated with political parties. Substantive and procedural requirements for all political parties, such as registration, are codified in Article 15. The article also sets the mandated and prohibited practices, two examples of the latter being receipt of money or assistance from outside Bhutan and political association on the basis of religion, region, or ethnicity.95

The Bhutanese monarchy has situated itself as the arbiter of the political game, above any other political actors, whom the monarchy has divided in order to rule. Formation of new parties in 2013 is another strategy the monarchy is using today to prevent the rise of a powerful party. The monarchy encouraged a system so that if one party emerged too powerful, all that was needed was to support some of its competitors to weaken it. In order to survive and enjoy the favor of the palace, the parties had to accept the theocratic concept of power, which made the king the political and spiritual head of the country and uncontested for the good of the nation. This strategy has indicated that the king has encouraged the formation of new political parties in Bhutan for the 2013 elections. However, the monarch has to be careful about parties who are not retaining the institution of monarchy. For this, the king has to recognize and reconcile with the liberal groups in exile to introduce an inclusive system, where all have an even playing field.
Since 2008, Bhutan has claimed to present itself in the image of a stable country moving toward democracy. Obviously, the supremacy of the monarchy prevails. The conclusion to be drawn here is that despite the impressive display of democratic-looking political parties and electoral competition, no significant power has devolved outside the regime. In other words, true democratization cannot exist without constitutional limitations on the king’s power. The authoritarian monarchy has created a party to weaken the prevailing political tendencies.

All these instances illustrate the efforts that Bhutan’s monarchy has taken to maintain authoritarianism by weakening all popular movements regardless of their ideology—even those that are profoundly monarchists, as was the case with PDP. Despite their instrumental value within the political system, and possibly even because of that, there is little interest on the part of the ruling elites to develop these parties of power into fully institutionalized organizations with a clear ideological profile. The dependency of the party in the state would be broken with the formation of a party with a will and a power base of its own. The oxygen of these parties is hence their relationship with the state. In fact, being an exceptionally weak institution, such parties will most likely disintegrate once deprived of their connection with the state, and herein lies the “Bhutanese political paradox.” A truly competitive multiparty system cannot emerge within a system of parties of power, which unbalances the electoral game in favor of a single party or a set of political parties that thrive on the spoils of the state and king. At the same time, they ought to facilitate the development of parties based on distinct ideological profiles to undercut existing patronage patterns and to facilitate electoral competition around clear programmatic alternatives. Only once these preconditions are met will parties make the transition to a different model and contribute to a further democratization of the political system.

As discussed above, Bhutanese parties function as instruments of cooptation and political hegemony, enabling the ruling elites to sustain their regime without major internal challenges. In so doing, parties of power rob the concept of “political party” of its traditional meaning in Western democracies. Traditional opposition parties have perceived the rise of new parties as a threat to society and the future of the country. There are several cases of the regime sowing division among pro-democracy parties. One of the aims of the regime is to keep the opposition divided.

I have argued that the trademarks of these types of parties constitute a serious stumbling block for the development of a multiparty system based on competing
ideological currents in Bhutan. For democracy to take hold in Bhutan, it is crucial that the logic of parties be replaced by one structured around autonomous and ideologically cohesive parties. It is even risky for the Bhutan king, as coherently argued by Lust-Okaramaney and Jamal:

Where political opponents can coalesce, resulting in strong, unified blocks against the regime, the results of electoral reform and the regime’s ability to control liberalization are severely threatened. To some extent, the social bases of these parties; their internal political structures; the emergence of strong, charismatic leaders; and strategic choices made within, and outside the political system may significantly alter the course of liberalization.98

Beyond the reform of the authoritarian regime in Bhutan, assistance and encouragement should be given to the formation of autonomous and ideologically cohesive political parties. Equally, parties should be encouraged to translate such ideological precepts into coherent policy positions so that in the long run, the shift of loyalties from clientelistic practices to programmatic principles can be achieved. Together, these changes would surely enhance the nature of multiparty competition and with it the quality of democracy in Bhutan. The formation and institutionalization of strong opposition parties is a prerequisite for the development of meaningful competition in Bhutan. Like their counterparts in consolidated democracies, parties in Bhutan are the crucial institutions of democracy, in the sense that they structure political competition, aggregate societal interests, serve as the primary link between elites and masses, and even build trust in democratic institutions.

As conferred above, there were five royalist parties formed inside Bhutan from 2007 to 2013, but their role is limited. In the first place, there is a tendency toward multiplication that keeps parties weak—and serves the palace. The proliferation of new parties in 2013 was fed by sentiments of political rivalry and the palace’s own interest in balancing power. The impact of political parties is limited, not simply by deficiencies in their own strength, whether inherent or imposed by the palace, but also by the relative weakness of the two parties in which they may find expression. With such a serious handicap, parliament is generally reduced to a rubber stamp. However ineffective it was at elaborating a body of law or balancing executive powers, and though it was annoying to the palace, the king recognized the usefulness of parliament as a bridge to his subjects. The king thus continued to control the political game. Since the mid-2000s, he has established himself as both the master player and the referee. Political contestants have been admitted to the playing field at his discretion and remain so as long as they abide by his rules. He frequently addresses the nation
with patrimonial phrases, which has set the tone of politics. For as long as they play by the king’s rules, all parties inside Bhutan are “king’s men.” The effectiveness of parties at articulating popular demands is perhaps limited by their own divisiveness, but this is even more restricted by the weight of the monarchy. Neither parties nor the state bureaucracy can operate with any significant measure of independence from the throne, and the king has carefully controlled the political agenda. The fact that the constitution was prepared by the palace and submitted to referendum with tutored debates or no consultation with exiled oppositions casts doubts upon the king’s inclination to relinquish his monopoly of power.

Ruling royalist parties are reluctant democratizers, unwilling to implement more than superficial reform, unless they are driven to do so by the threat of large-scale protest promoted by exile-based parties. Political parties are engaged in what Andreas Schedler terms a “nested game.” Schedler clarifies: “To the extent that opposition parties succeed in accumulating strength in the electoral arena, they improve their chances to extract institutional reforms from the ruling party. . . . Rather than establishing a self-enforcing equilibrium, ambivalent elections thus then to trigger a self-subversive spiral that over time undermines both the institutional and the electoral bases of the authoritarian incumbent.”

However, this is very remote in the prevailing situation of Bhutan. Today, Bhutan finds itself what Diamond and Schedler call “electoral authoritarianism” or “electoral autocracy.” The elections in 2008 seemed to signal a change in Bhutan’s political landscape, but it is increasingly evident today that is not the case. The regime, for its part, counts on the proliferation of small parties to prevent such a scenario from materializing, thus making Bhutan an exception. There is no party powerful enough to dispute the hegemony of the current king. What the regime seems to overlook, though, is the fact that the scenarios it is concocting may prove costly due to gross miscalculation: resisting genuine change and attempting to preserve the current political system through obsolete stratagems. The Bhutanese people will not be content with a façade democracy in which political parties only represent themselves. They are yearning for real change.

The regime is ill-advised to assume that cosmetic reforms will perpetuate its rule indefinitely. The burgeoning of insignificant parties will surely not alleviate the socioeconomic and political shortcomings of the regime. Despite there being five different royalist political parties, there is difficulty in the party leaders being able to provide clearly ideological features that distinguishes one from the
other. In other words, the differences between the political parties seem to be more in the aspirational and tactical context than ideological. This and the smallness of the Bhutanese population could be an issue in the longevity of the political parties, particularly in the post-election era. The rural population might still be struggling to catch up with what the political parties and king democratic process is all about. The Kuensel reports the feeling of a local official that “people don’t take election-related meetings seriously, because of a gap between the elected members and voters.” Since the authorities are aware of this gap, one of the challenges for the election and for whichever party is elected to run the government is to see they can put democracy in context to the ordinary people and to make the people realize in concrete terms the value of democracy in their day-to-day existence. Short of genuine change, Bhutan will remain an exception only in the imagination of its incumbent rulers. Hence, it is obvious that this lack of in-depth reforms may not help restore public confidence in the political process.

**Delimitation of Constituencies**

A wealth of literature has demonstrated that electoral rules help to determine the number of parties and vote-receiving candidates that emerge in a political system, the extent to which electoral outcomes are representative of minority social groups or ideologies, and the stability of parliamentary cabinets. Even in limited liberalization, electoral rules are important. The mechanical results of electoral rules insinuate that these rules shape electoral outcomes and influence representation.

However, in Bhutan, there is gerrymandering of electoral districts to dilute the representation of ethnic community. The constitution contains a subtle mechanism to discriminate the Lhotsampa and Sharchop community in the delineation of the constituencies. The political system favors royals, elites, and notables. This, together with the gerrymandering of districts, has produced a structurally unrepresentative parliament. This is just perpetuating the “Rentier State Model” as election districts are designed to maximize the number of members of parliament from ruling royalist areas, who are traditionally the group of the royal regime at the expense of another region and community. Election districts were gerrymandered so that sparsely populated Ngalung districts in the West got almost as many members as the heavily populated Lhotsampa and Sharchop districts and villages in the East and South.
If the statistics are any indicator, Table 4.4 explains vividly the political chess game of Bhutan today and the manipulation by the regime. The forty-seven constituencies are very unequal in size. The largest district, which is largely stronghold of Lhotsampas and Sharchops, contains 65,400 people with 40,400 voters (Samtse) and 52,500 people with 38,274 voters (Trashigang); whereas the smallest, mainly Ngalungs, has only 3,400 people with 1,647 voters.

Table 4.4. Delimitation of Electoral Constituencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area in Square Kilometers</th>
<th>Constituency/Districts</th>
<th>Gewogs/Blocks</th>
<th>Chiwogs/Villages</th>
<th>Population November 7, 2010</th>
<th>Eligible Voters December 12, 2010</th>
<th>Representation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2,611</td>
<td>Bumthang</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17,500</td>
<td>6,463</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,728</td>
<td>Chukka</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>81,400</td>
<td>19,791</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,344</td>
<td>Dagana</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>25,100</td>
<td>19,661</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4,185</td>
<td>Gasa</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3,400</td>
<td>1,647</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,651</td>
<td>Haa</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12,600</td>
<td>6,092</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,764</td>
<td>Lheuntse</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>16,500</td>
<td>13,541</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,881</td>
<td>Monger</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>40,700</td>
<td>28,108</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,229</td>
<td>Paro</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>39,800</td>
<td>14,990</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>499</td>
<td>Pemaghashel</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>23,800</td>
<td>18,137</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>922</td>
<td>Punakha</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>25,700</td>
<td>13,471</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,227</td>
<td>Samdrupjonkar</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>37,300</td>
<td>20,043</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,497</td>
<td>Samtse</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>65,400</td>
<td>40,400</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,188</td>
<td>Sarpang</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>41,300</td>
<td>23,195</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,843</td>
<td>Thimphu</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>104,200</td>
<td>50,24</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,188</td>
<td>Trashigang</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>52,500</td>
<td>38,274</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,382</td>
<td>Tashiyangtse</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>19,300</td>
<td>15,061</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,728</td>
<td>Trongsa</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14,700</td>
<td>7,618</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>614</td>
<td>Tsirang</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>20,300</td>
<td>18,885</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3,878</td>
<td>Wangdhiprodang</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>34,300</td>
<td>15,283</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,035</td>
<td>Zhemgang</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20,100</td>
<td>14,608</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominated by king</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>205</td>
<td>1,042</td>
<td>695,800</td>
<td>340,823</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Thus, for example, Gasa Dzongkhag had 1,647 registered voters with a population of 3,400, but it got two constituencies for the National Assembly and one for the National Council. Samtse and Trashigang districts had 65,400 and 52,500 registered voters, but had just four and five constituencies for the National Assembly, respectively, and one each for the National Council.
Districts Tsiring, Sarpang, Zhemgang, Ha, and Tashiyangtse have 18,885, 23,195, 14,608, 6,092 and 15,061 voters, respectively, but the allocation of the constituency is two each for all. For example, there was an imbalanced distribution of blocks constituencies in the districts, in proportion to their size and population. According to electorate statistics of 2011, Wangdue Phodrang in the West with an electorate population of 14,807 has been delimited for fifteen gups/blocks, whereas Samtse in the South with an electorate population of 34,958 also has fifteen gups/blocks. Trashigang in the East, with an electorate population of 29,080, has fifteen gups/blocks as well. Party organization and legislature, it is argued, are created to offer a formal arena for elite bargaining, to enhance career prospects and influence, and to channel the demand of the significant social group. This indicates that delimitation is done arbitrarily without any scientific basis to represent people but more as demographic manipulation by the regime to consolidate power and control politics.

The total eligible voters in 2013 were 379,819 for the National Assembly and 381,790 for the National Council. The total eligible voters in 2008 were 318,465 for the National Assembly and 312,502 for the National Council. There is a clear distinction in seat delineation for South, East, West, and central Bhutan. In the first elections of 2008, roughly one candidate represented ten thousand voters in Southern Bhutan, six thousand voters in Eastern Bhutan, five thousand voters in Western Bhutan, and four thousand voters in central Bhutan in the National Assembly. As per the government report, the total registered voters were 400,626 individuals, of which the South had 118,584 individuals, representing nearly 30 percent of the total eligible voters. Their representation in the National Assembly remained at 19 percent. However, the representation was much worse in 2013 election. In 2013, Tshering Tobgay became the new prime minister of Bhutan after the result of general elections. He formed the PDP government with the induction of ten ministers on July 26. The Southern region was allocated three ministers but only one to represent Lhotsampas, the West has three ministers including the prime minister and deputy speaker, the central region has one minister, and the East has three ministers and speaker. Given the skewed balance of power between incumbents and opposition groups, electoral rules are largely determined from above. So in the case of Bhutan, it seems the delimitation of districts and the whole election exercise was premeditated and orchestrated regarding who should win, how many candidates would be fielded from the Lhotsampa and Sharchop community, and who among the Lhotsampas and Sharchops would get tickets for contesting the election.
Thus, the king and elites are firmly in control of state resources and accesses to them. They control access to political offices. They also control the rules of the political game. The royal Election Commission determines which parties may or may not participate in the formal political system, how they can operate, whether they may have ties to international organizations, where they can receive their funding, and what ideologies they may or may not purport. Incumbents control access to the office and the ability to hold political positions. Nothing is guaranteed. Managed liberalization gives us an extremely useful opportunity to understand how the regime type influences elites’ preferences over, and choices of, new institutions in a country like Bhutan.

Rebranding Bhutan’s Monarchy by Electoral Process and Political Participation

Elections legitimatize the regime by creating a façade of democracy and making the public believe that the autocrats have popular mandate. Many scholars view authoritarian elections as an institutional tool that the dictators can use to coopt elites, party members, or larger groups within the society. Other theories focus on the usefulness of election in making elite cohesiveness and distributing patronage. For a king, elections may be the most expedient way to spread the spoils of office broadly among the members of the conservative and royalist elites.

Bhutan has held local and legislative elections that were not relatively open and competitive and were never intended to bring about political change from below. Puzzled by the seeming incompatibility of authoritarian regimes and the election, scholars view the establishment of election as a means by which dictators hold onto power. Elections in Bhutan were designed to provide a mechanism of elite control and renewal from above through an administrative process of restructuring, reward, exclusion, and cooptation. It is merely to perpetuate authoritarian rule by giving it a veneer of legitimacy. Reading the statement that in Bhutan the government is accountable to king, one might get the impression that party elections are nothing more than an exercise of royal legitimation, serving no democratic purpose.

The autocratic political system in Bhutan in which democracy is expected to put down its roots and burgeon has tough nuts royalists and conservative elites with guns to repress dissident. The masses do not take these elections seriously because they know that “the game is fixed” as same ministers and bureaucrats who have served the monarchy in the past have opened the political parties to
contest the election, and vocal opposition based in exile is not allowed to return and participate in the election. This is also interestingly summarized by Tshering Chophel in following words:

Changes in political systems hither to were implemented within the centrally-pushed framework, resulting in local governments simply becoming godfather or mere custodian of prescribed rules, but not the legitimate source of change. Such dimensions of democratic transition rather increase the local governments’ dependency with little increase in the autonomy, despite full devolution from the central government. These arguments hold water for the political liberalization, the impetus for which “comes from below” the people. The bottom up clamor from local governments, based on actual needs for certain benefits and efficiency gains of public service delivery, has greater impact than that initiated as top-down central government prerogative. Even if the clamor comes from below, if the policy formulation and design are made by the central government (without involvement of ultimate beneficiaries, i.e., people at the grass-root level), the system remains with its theoretical beauty extravagantly nourished with hypothetical benefits without much impact on the ground.

The constitution of Bhutan’s Article 7(6) states that every citizen shall have the right to vote. However, this right has been contradicted by the chief justice of Bhutan stating that all religious individuals or those who are in monkhood are above politics. If so, then why is the monarch a protector and controller of all religions? This is a loophole in the constitution of Bhutan as it simply deprives monks and Gomchens (mediators) from exercising their fundamental right to vote. This act of the constitution gives the citizens of religious bodies a status of second-class citizen. Moreover, with the implementation of democracy, free society should be encouraged. However, in Bhutan, certain citizens are not given the right to elect their representative to govern their country. It has been observed that in other democratic nations, the criminals are also granted with the right to vote. However, the Bhutanese people are not entitled to all rights and liberties. In a country, which was founded by Zhabdrung, a religious person, and ruled by monks and religious personalities for more than 70 percent of the country’s history, monks and religious figures, along with those in jail, are today restricted from voting. Bhutan: Is Democracy Discriminatory? by the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy on November 5, 2013, states: “Depriving religious personalities from the electoral process is a ‘total slap’ in the face of Bhutanese tradition, Constitution and the dignity of a human being. It is understandable to disallow religious personalities to be non-partisan, just as civil servants, but depriving them of fundamental right to vote undermined the constitution and electoral law.” The Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy won’t be flabbergasted to see formation of a right-wing Buddhist political party in Bhutan. Religious political parties have played a vital role in democracy: right-wing Christian parties in Europe have played important roles
in democracy, good or bad. Democracy is not about being good or bad; it is all about people’s choice. Each and every person should be given the right to speak and choose their representative.

The election excluded around eighty thousand Lhotasampas, who were deprived citizenship certificates as well as voter cards as they have anti-national relatives in refugee camps in Nepal and Western diasporas. Bhutanese citizens from exile are barred from returning, preempts their rights to vote as they have been branded as anti-national for pleading for a people’s democracy and human rights from the same royalists in power today.

The constitution guarantees freedom of assembly, but the government attempts to impede criticism and monitor political meetings. Individuals were unable to criticize the government publicly. Shneiderman and Twin claim: “Bhutan’s democratic exercise to be carefully controlled by entrenched elites.” The idea of democracy has become so closely identified with elections that it is in danger of forgetting that the modern history of representative elections is a tale of authoritarian manipulations as much as it is a saga of democratic triumphs. Historically, in other words, elections have been an instrument of authoritarian control as well as a means of democratic governance. Coerced votes and numerous complaints in the first and second elections reflect the public’s general disillusionment with the formal political process. This is more prevalent in the election of a mayor of four municipalities and representatives of local bodies, where voters showed minimum interest. In municipal elections, the voter turnout has been just 50.76 percent. Only 4,295 voters’ cast their votes, out of a total of 8,462 registered voters. Invariably, it was the same with the election of members of municipalities, where voter turnout has been just 50.86 percent. A total of 3,630 voters cast their votes out of 7,137 registered voters. Still, it is very difficult to get the right candidate to contest election. This is mainly due to stringent conditions set for contesting election with functional literacy in Dzongkha, the language of ruling class, and the physical presence of voters in the place, where they have thram (land record), a tool of controlled voting.

Kuensel notes:

Dzongkha will always be the unifying language for this country and anyone, who has desires to rise to the top in government or in politics, knows very well it cannot be done without a command of the national language. Aspiring politicians are already working on improving their Dzongkha vocabulary, and finding Dzongkha equivalents for English language words like statistics and inflation. Wherever possible, official meetings are being increasingly held in Dzongkha. However, it does not make sense that it be done if those attending the meeting do not speak or understand it. And this is particularly true
in case of rural Bhutan, where exposure is minimal and people generally speak their own dialects or language.\textsuperscript{119}

The Bhutan elections are unique not only because they were ordered by the king, but also unlike in other South Asian countries, they are based on educational qualifications. The framers of the 2008 constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan makes every effort to insulate the document from political quagmire by putting in place certain qualifications, namely that the candidates contesting the poll should be graduates only, making way for the technocrats to run for elected offices. Under the newly framed election laws, no one can contest parliamentary elections without having a graduate degree. This has been justified on the ground that lessons learned from neighbors include that it is vital to keep the newborn democracy away from the chaos and all the churning effects of politics. Article 23(30) of the constitution lists qualifications for a candidate with respect to age (twenty-five to sixty-five at the time of nomination) and education (necessary educational and other qualifications prescribed in the electoral laws) that restricts access to political office. Bhutan has very small graduate community of just a few thousand persons. This is also indicative of the fact that, in a country where literacy rate is very low, the graduate community may mostly come from the upper and the elite sections of the society.

Ever since the fabrication of so-called royal representative government, political actors have been tempted to control electoral outcomes by controlling the composition of the electorate, whether by formal or informal means. In a democracy, the people should rule over themselves; the people are sovereign. This sovereignty must be distributed equally—pace the sovereignty of states\textsuperscript{120}—since unequal distribution of sovereignty implies that some segments of the people are not sovereign. This is what Locke referred to as all men are, or ought to be, considered equal as political beings\textsuperscript{121} and what Dahl calls the “idea of intrinsic equality.”\textsuperscript{122} It follows logically that rule by the people requires equality of political participation. Equality of participation is a core dimension of democracy since it is a requisite of self-government as the expression of the sovereignty of the people. For a political system to have the potential to be democratic, it has to provide legal provisions for political participation. However, this has gone astray in Bhutan as a sizable segment of population are denied political participation.

The degree of management of the elections was also evident in the screening of the contesting parties. One of the parties, the Druk Peoples’ Unity Party, was disqualified due to what was described as a lack of “credible leadership” in first
election in 2008. It was alleged that more than 75 percent of the party members were school dropouts. The elimination of the third party also reduced the two-stage electoral process into a direct one stage in first election. According to election laws, the first stage of the elections was to filter out all but the two highest-ranking (in terms of votes secured in the first stage) parties for the second and the final stage. The Election Commission had also disqualified a candidate of the PDP, who tried to play up the problem of Bhutanese of Nepali origin. This was done to send a firm message that there was no room in Bhutan for communal and sectarian politics. There was a clear decision to keep the Nepali issue out of the political process. A person could not contest the elections if any of his/her parents were a migrant Bhutanese.\textsuperscript{123}

In the contemporary world, formal disenfranchisement is a very tough “sell” both domestically and abroad. Legal apartheid is not a viable model anymore. The real growth ends of the business, therefore, lie in the realm of informal disenfranchisement. Ethnic cleansing, the persecution, physical elimination, and forced displacement of certain groups of citizens, as of non-Arabic–speaking blacks in Mauritania in the early 1990s, is the most atrocious way of stripping citizens of their franchise and much more. Less uncivil authoritarians may resort to subtler techniques. They may devise registration methods, identification requirements, and voting procedures that are universal in form but systematically discriminatory in practice. In addition, they may manipulate the voter rolls, illicitly adding or deleting names, or bar voters from polling stations on trumped up legal or technical grounds.\textsuperscript{124} Bhutan has custom made precisely the indistinguishable strategy of informal disenfranchising of ethnic cleansing, persecution, and forced displacement. To a certain extent, it has also adopted formal disenfranchisements.

In addition, those Bhutanese who are married to non-Bhutanese are prohibited from becoming candidates, in fact highlighting the wide-ranging implications of the citizenship rules and their application. Freedom of association is a universal right guaranteed in all major international human rights documents: Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 22 of the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights, and Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Freedom of association for minorities is enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities in Articles 2.4 and 2.5. The Bhutanese Constitution’s Article 23 on elections has a restriction, which is in effect probably discriminatory: “the requirement not to be married to a
person who is not a citizen of Bhutan’ would mainly affect minorities, especially Nepali-speaking Hindus, who for a number of reasons have historically often had spouses from outside Bhutan. Combining this with the discriminatory citizenship provisions means that a significant segment of this minority population is disenfranchised and unable to run for office and be elected under the Constitution.”

The willing voters and voter turnout are low, keeping in mind the fact that Bhutan is a country which is run through the decrees of the king and royalist government. They have literally forced the people to go to polling booths to vote without any alternatives, as failure to vote the royalist party connotes severe punishment. This is revealed in Tables 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7.

### Table 4.5. First (2008) and Second (2013) Elections and Voter Turnout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Registered Voters</th>
<th>Votes Cast</th>
<th>Voter Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Assembly</td>
<td>318,465</td>
<td>379,819</td>
<td>183,081</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Council</td>
<td>312,502</td>
<td>381,790</td>
<td>257,414</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Table 4.6. Votes Received by Parties in the Primary Round of Election in 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Political Party</th>
<th>Total Registered Voters</th>
<th>Total Votes Received</th>
<th>Votes Secured in Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People’s Democratic Party</td>
<td>68,650</td>
<td>32.53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Druk Phuensum Tshogpa</td>
<td>93,949</td>
<td>44.52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa</td>
<td>35,962</td>
<td>17.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Druk Chirwang Tshogpa</td>
<td>12,457</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Registered Voters</td>
<td>381,790</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: There was no primary round of elections in 2008 as there were only two parties.


### Table 4.7. Votes Received by Parties in the Final Round of Elections in 2008 and 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Political Party</th>
<th>Total Registered Voters</th>
<th>Total Votes Received</th>
<th>Votes Secured in Percentage</th>
<th>Number of Seats Won</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People’s Democratic Party</td>
<td>83,322</td>
<td>138,760</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>54.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Druk Phuensum Tshogpa</td>
<td>169,490</td>
<td>114,093</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>45.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The tables highlight that in 2013 final elections, the PDP won thirty-two of the forty-seven seats in the National Assembly to form the government for the next five years. The DPT, which was the incumbent party, won fifteen seats. The voter turnout was at 66.08 percent, a drop from the 82.39 percent of the 2008 general elections. In the 2008 general election, DPT won forty-five seats, while PDP had won only two seats. The 2013 elections also reflect the declining voter turnout in both elections.\textsuperscript{126}

The 2008 elections for the National Council had only attracted 53.04 percent of the registered voters, but this already low figure declined further in 2013 with only 45.16 percent of voters going to the poll. While the state of affairs for the National Assembly was better, the trend was still downward. In 2008, a very respectable 79.4 percent of the electorate had voted, but in 2013 that declined to 66.13 percent. The parties and candidates certainly exhorted people to vote, and the king added his support, but the feeling of obligation, following the command of, or acceding to the king’s wishes that characterized 2008 seemed to have declined, if not departed.

The second aspect was the realization that parties were weak institutions and unlikely or unable to contribute to political socialization leading to democratic legitimation. The electoral rules meant that parties were necessarily of the electoral type, restricted in their interelection activities. They simply come to life every five years but remain dormant in the intervening years. The voter turnout is also somewhat mitigated by the fact that eighty-two thousand Lhotsampas Bhutanese living within the country were declared non-nationals under the 2005 census and were therefore ineligible to vote.\textsuperscript{127}

There are reports that the king intervened in the general elections of 2013. Some people allege that King Keshar (K5) in person had personally campaigned in five dzongkhag in favor of one political party against the other. The king had also instructed army officials and senior civil servants to oversee the postal ballots of its people to vote for a favored political party. Besides, on the eve of the general election, the 205 Gups and hundreds of local government officials received a call from the royal secretariat, directing the people to vote for a favored party. The people believe that the king’s intention in electoral politics
has violated constitutional Article 2, sec. 1 and 2, which says the king is the symbol of unity of the kingdom and of the people of Bhutan and upholder of Chhoe-sid-nyi (temporal and ecclesiastical). How can the king, a symbol of unity of the kingdom and above politics, indulge in electoral politics of parties? Article 2, sec. 15, which says, “King shall not be answerable in a court of law for his actions and his person shall be sacrosanct, provides protection to the monarch. There is no law to rein in the monarch.” One can never be certain whether his personal interventions have an influence on the outcome of elections and the fortunes of one party, but one thing is irrefutable: the level playing field has been certainly violated, if the reports carry an ounce of truth.

It has also been reported that the president, the vice president, and a prominent promoter of DNT has joined the PDP. The strength and status of the party has been taken away, and the major part of the 17.5 percent of primary votes went with the candidates, who have swapped over. The joining of eight DNT candidates with the PDP is not uncommon in other democracies, but in state-controlled elections and the palace’s alleged hand in the elections, this is a serious issue as this might have played a role to weaken the stronger DPT. When a political party receives around 18 percent of votes in the primary election, it represents nearly one-fifth of the Bhutanese population. How can the astute manipulations garrote the voice of nearly one-fifth of the Bhutanese? There is no law to deal with alliance formation of political parties—DNT and PDP under the leadership of Tsering Tobgay. Even the royal constitution is absent in this unconstitutional and unfair political game. The silence of the Election Commission indicates the invisible hands of the palace. The moot question is why the Election Commission of Bhutan gave the approval stamp to this emergence of “Political Parties Alliance.” This persuasively provides credibility and benefits of doubt to the claims and allegations raised by Jigme Thinley and his party about the alleged election frauds.

When PDP lost the elections of 2008, some five hundred people from Punakha and Wangdiphodrang approached the king and expressed their displeasure in the election process and democracy. The difference in 2008 was that PDP leadership, under Sangay Nidup, accepted the people’s mandate after complaining on a few things here and there. The DPT leadership, while expressing their displeasure, went further in 2013. The Election Act has a provision where a ten-day period is kept to resolve any election disputes, which can be heard in the high court. The DPT thought that the Election Commission disagreed with one of their grievances and deemed the procedure
“unacceptable,” and had thus bypassed the letters and spirits of the Election Acts.

The DPT submitted a fifteen-point petition to the king on July 19, 2013, which was drawn after five-hour meetings among with DPT supporters at the party office in Thimphu. Of the fifteen issues, the main concerns were the politicization or involvement of officials within His Majesty’s secretariat and the timing of their granting of kidus, in terms of census and land to people, and PDP’s pledges to give people census, land, and luring armed forces. The action of the Karma Ura, civil servant, was also in the list. The DPT action of submitting the petition to the king violates the Constitution of Bhutan. Going by past knowledge and precedents of submission of petitions pertaining to a census problem of Lhotsampas to King Jigme (K4) by Tek Nath Rizal in 1988, such an idea was highly treasonable with maximum punishment in the simplest terms. Also not adhering to the precept of constitution is highly treasonable offence. However, King Kesher (K5) had assured DPT that the matter would be looked into. They threatened to dissolve the party and decided that the fifteen winning candidates should refrain from taking the opposition role in the National Assembly.

One inexplicable question even the layman asks is: How did a party, who won thirty-three seats in the primary round a month ago, lose eighteen seats and win only fifteen seats? There are many external and internal factors. Numerous factors have been cited for such a verdict in the 2013 elections. One source requesting anonymity offers these explanations. First and foremost, it is said, all votes from the armed forces and their families were cast as per the directive of their officers, who had specific briefings from Jigme Singye (K4) and Jigme Keshar (K5). The postal ballots from the armed forces too were carefully prepared on royal command and received by respective company officers. The ex-Superintendent of Police Rinchen Thinley and former Royal Advisory Councillor Sangye Wangdi, at the directives of the palace, lobbied Gups, former members of parliament, and other influential people of the East to vote for the PDP. For instance, the duo was caught instructing people of Chhali, Monger, on July 5, 2013. They were detained by Monger police on the allegation of misleading voters. However, they were released when it was understood that they were actually royal emissaries sent for the mission of guiding voters to vote for the PDP. Despite this, the DPT bagged all votes from Monger as the duo could not brainwash major sections of the voters who were committed to the DPT and had faith and trust in the party. King Keshar (K5) had personally
assured the people in the South that census and citizenship problems would be solved.

The Lhotsampa votes played a lead role. In this election, the Lhotshampa community delivered twelve seats to the PDP. The Lhotsampa community is in majority in eight seats and decisive in four seats. Every Bhutanese, including the DPT, knows that the census and citizenship predicament is their sole problem affecting them. They gave the DPT a five-year opportunity to resolve their issues, but their unsolved issues continues hereafter, and instead it was declared that it was the king’s prerogative to grant citizenships. This time around, they voted the PDP in the hope that a change of administration would work for their good. In the primary elections, the DPT won seven seats; in the general election, it got zero.

The Sharchop factor is always there. From Eastern Bhutan, the PDP won six seats from six districts after it pledged to provide a special economic package to the Eastern region to bring economic development at par with the Western region. The Eastern region has been mostly neglected in history by the Wangchuk administration. King Jigme (K4) only initiated development activities after the 1990s Southern problem to garner the support of Easterners to set in opposition against Southerners. The five years of DPT administration didn’t bring any radical economic development in the East, despite being the region blessed with rich natural and mineral resources. The PDP pledged to build three colleges in the East and to give ministerial berth to each six dzongkhags besides special economic packages have tilted voters toward PDP.

Another factor relates the Indo-Bhutan Trade Protocol for subsidy grants expired on June 30, 2013. So, India proposed that Bhutan renew the agreement on subsidy on liquid petroleum gas and petrol. However, King Jigme (K4) is believed to have told India to wait until a new government is formed after the election.

If there is any truth in these stories, there is a fear that democracy in Bhutan is ripped off in the name of change through a maneuvered election process by giving a boost to the party chosen not by the people, but by the palace. When India questioned King Jigme (K4) about Jigmi Y. Thinley’s alleged relationship with China, the king convinced India that it was absolutely Thinley’s personal interest and assured that Bhutan would always remain dependent on and the closest friend to India. Some sections of the Bhutanese, including DPT members, alleged that the government of India has also played a vital role in making the DPT lose the general election by raising the price of liquid petroleum gas. The
external factors are purely speculative; the internal factors were decisive. The external issue, particularly India’s friendship with Bhutan, was much discussed in the campaign trail. The Indian Government’s withdrawal of fuel subsidies was construed to be sending a message to the Bhutanese electorate about who to vote for.¹²⁹

Jigme Thinley resigned as a member of the National Assembly on the grounds of giving young people an opportunity.¹³⁰ If the allegations are true, King Khesar (K5) has set a bad precedent, which will be counterproductive for the institution of monarchy in the long run. The absence of King Khesar (K5) at the commencement of first session of the historical second National Assembly can be correlated to his alleged intention to electoral politics. Such issues and irritants will remain strong as long as an inclusive democracy is absent in Bhutan. If this is the precursor of royal democracy, in comparative perspective, Bhutan may take the trend similar to Thai politics and role of Thai king in the future. One can never be sure of the actual truth in a closed society like Bhutan, where people fear to speak and express their views. However, one thing is certain: it would be great setback to Bhutanese royal democracy if deliberations on foreign policy and the Bhutan-India friendship are made sacrosanct in future elections.

However, one positive aspect is that there was greater competition for political office with the number of royalist parties increasing from two to five and the number of candidates for the National Council growing from forty-four to sixty-seven. Voters were also prepared to remove incumbents. The DPT party that had won by a landslide in 2008 was ousted by the opposition party from the first parliament, the PDP—from a forty-five-to-two defeat in 2008 to a thirty-two-to-fifteen victory in 2013. In the National Council elections, of fifteen incumbents of the first National Council that stood in 2013 only six succeeded in being reelected. The increase in candidates may be due to attractive salary and other benefits packages, as most of the candidates are former civil servants and not a real increase due to ideology of parties. Tshering Chophel notes: “Until such measures are in place, we will have people, who are attracted to status or perks, take the post of our parliament as well as local governments. We will have people craving for the sacred democratic posts, merely out of no other choice to have a job. As a result, we will come across issues that are beyond the teething problems of a new system.”¹³¹

The monarch has ruled absolutely, using elections to disguise palace absolutism. Bhutan today is a classic example.¹³² Ben Peterson notes that the
election has no credibility as being generally democratic with almost a sixth of country living in exile and another 13 percent disenfranchised, when only two political parties both staunchly royalists was allowed to participate. The absence of a single and simple electoral code gives the administration leeway to include or exclude candidates and to manipulate the electoral process and results at will. Other devices to control the electoral process include the creation of royalist political parties and endorsement by the administration headed by men close to the king. Elections keep autocrats by establishing legitimacy at home or abroad. Elections may be manipulated and of limited political influence, but they can nevertheless signal to the domestic and international audience that the regime is, or is in the process of becoming, based on popular will. Although controlling the electoral process has kept the political elite in power and has ensured a minimum of institutional political consensus around the monarchy, it has proven unable to channel political mobilization from below. “Election does not automatically give democracy. . . . The political culture in a democracy needs to be tolerant of dissent.” But in contrast, those in Bhutan already in power strive to limit dissent and manipulate democracy to ensure their longevity, and they rearrange electorates to preserve their electoral advantage.

Students of new democracies have long been awake to the danger of “tutelary powers” undermining the authority of democratic politics. Under authoritarian tutelage, elected representatives possess their constitutional powers only on paper, as observed in Bhutan today. In fact, they are subordinated to the whims and wishes of their unaccountable masters. The formation of new electoral institutions depends on the preferences and power of the actors involved, and more powerful players can force the creation of institutions that suit their preferences. For instance, Bates argues that “those institutions will be created that favor what have long been referred to as ‘special interests.’” Similarly, Przeworski noted that when the distribution of power among actors is skewed and certain, incumbents create institutions that favor their interests. This is the situation in Bhutan today. The king and strong incumbent elites with weak opponents in exile prefer stricter authoritarianism. In the absence of real opponents in Bhutan, there is hardly any pressure to shape electoral laws. Thus, these electoral rules largely reflect the incumbents’ preferences. The long-standing conventional wisdom regarding why authoritarian regimes establish parties, hold elections, and convene legislatures is that these institutions convey an aura of legitimacy, both domestically and to the outside world.
I argue that the elections in Bhutan serve as the regime’s most important device for the distribution of rents and promotions to important groups within Bhutan’s politically influential classes including royal families, businesspersons, and party apparatchik. For party cohorts, the ability to limit the opposition in exile serves as a signal of competence and loyalty to regime leadership, and officials are promoted and demoted on this basis. For members of Bhutan’s politically influential upper class, parliamentary elections work as a kind of market mechanism for the selection of those individuals who will be allowed to extract state rents in the future. In addition to the quasi-legitimate benefits of holding office, the elections also serve as a type of auction for the right to parliamentary immunity for members of this elite class. Under the cover of parliamentary immunity, individuals who are able to win once have the ability to engage in corruption with little fear of prosecution, as resiliently observed since 2008. The corruptions and land scams from 2008 by members of parliament, including the former speaker, the former home minister, and others, is a case in point. I argue that liberalization has increased the perceived or real value of holding a parliamentary seat over time and that the parliamentary incumbency rate reflects this trend. As a result, parties and elections are a central part of a survival strategy. This tenaciously demonstrates and explains the royal elections in Bhutan. Only personal connections and not ideological convictions have guided the formation of political parties. The rules that govern the relationship between state and society in Bhutan are clear, and the fundamental axiom is that the king is untouchable.

The monarchy wants to retain power, and thus it promotes electoral rules that will enhance its stability. In the monarchy’s case, this insinuates that the monarchy prefers electoral rules that favor representation of royalist political parties, who cannot challenge the existing system and power base. The unchecked expansion of parties, led by new actors, may make the management of competing centers of power too difficult. These preferences are based on the unique role of the monarchy in their political system. The condition of “habitual legitimacy” is of particular relevance to Bhutan. When political opposition arose among the Lotshampa and Sharchop populations, the state imposed its authority through exporting the offending population and enforcing the practices of a one nation, one people policy. Political repression has been more extensive and more dramatic in Bhutan. The punishment for not abiding by the prescribed rules of the king’s game is exclusion, or, in the extreme, outright expulsion.
Eight years of “royal semi-authoritarian democracy” warns us that decisions and policies are still initiated at the top rather than bottom. The majority of the Bhutanese is still unaware of the changes taking place in the polity of the country, and citizens are still unable to come out of their fear-psychosis shell. The controlled election is only deflecting attention from the nucleus of the state affairs. The fundamentally nondemocratic structure of the state might be legitimated by elections that only serve to strengthen the regime. One must not overlook the basic democratic deficit in the system. The 2013 elections were indeed an insightful eye opener for understanding Bhutan’s democratization process. A not-much-talked-about factor in the 2013 elections in Bhutan is the role of the king. The unpredictable turn that the elections took after the first round perhaps offers a clue. The domestic debates that took place before the elections highlight the friction between the monarchy and the DPT. The DPT convention, which took place in Thimpu, highlighted a few critical factors. One of the issues that came to the fore was allegations held against the palace secretariat and the army, accusing them of a non-ethical role in Bhutan’s politics. Since the army is headed by the king himself, critical conclusions can be drawn from this. It is interesting that while these issues have not been discussed much, there has been less political activity in Thimpu since the 2013 elections.\^143

We have differentiated above that all Bhutanese are not induced to play the fair game, and the playing field is relatively constricted and asymmetrical. Lust Okar notes: “Until state elites monopoly of rents is limited, real state alterrance in power is not possible . . . democracy will remain thwarted.” Democracy in Bhutan can only be a function of reduced royal and royalist influence. Today, the semi-authoritarianism democracy does not address the basic democracy deficit—the all-powerful role of the king and the closely knit web based on “patronage-client” relationships between the king and conservative royalist elites.

The Bureaucrats, Political Elites, and Struggles for Power

The study of individual candidates’ attributes and their relationship with electoral performance is a well-established approach in the political science literature, especially in the field of American politics.\^144 In studies of other industrialized countries, the focus is more often on political parties, ideology, and policy differences.\^145 Data on the political background of candidates has also been used in the post-communist sphere.\^146 Elites in Bhutan have invariably been associated with the formal political institutions of the state. As Chandra notes,
those who have the capital to launch a political career tend to be “elites” (i.e., upwardly mobile middle-class individuals, better educated and better off than the voters whom they seek to mobilize). She notably uses the term “elite” interchangeably with the terms “politician,” “candidate,” “incumbent,” and “entrepreneur.” The critical essence is that elites are not a homogenous block; they are divided by ethnicity, functionality, politics, and economics in Bhutan.

The dictators establish credible power-sharing arrangements with their loyal friends and parties, and elections help serve this role. Boix and Svolik make a slightly different point: they argue that the legislatures provide the forum within which notables exchange information and elections serve as a signal of the influence of individual notables. Orthodox political science says that liberal democracy works best with a strong middle class that plays its part in keeping the state and its political elites accountable. This is frequently through associational activity in civil society. Another literature identifies elites as the linchpin in fostering a developmental state. The web of what binds Bhutan today is personal, hierarchical, non-transferable support of a traditional autocratic system and royalist parties by the king.

The structure of the National Assembly and the National Council resembles a contention analogous to one enlightened by Boix and Svolik and reveals that it is powerful royal bureaucracy. If we look at the profile of members of the National Assembly and the National Council, one will have feelings of real bureaucracy in extension dominated by elites, as elucidated by Chandra. The content and thrust of the debates reveal that the members are hardly critical of the governmental policies, but are more concerned to preserve their own interests and privileges. Even when they criticize, it is mostly done either to please the few elites or to prove their patriotism and nationalism. The profile of the winning candidates of the 2013 election has been studied more expansively with their educational background, country where they have studied, and their former positions in Bhutanese bureaucracy. If we look at the profiles, including former status and position in bureaucracy, education qualifications, and countries where they studied, one can gain perceptions of the real shadow elite bureaucracy in extension, as exhibited in Tables 4.8, 4.9, 4.10, and 4.11.

Table 4.8 Profile of Member of National Council 2008/2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Former Status/Position in Bureaucracy</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Director and deputy director</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance/bank manager/officers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 4.9 Profile of Member of National Assembly 2008/2013**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Former Status/Position in Bureaucracy</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chairperson of cabinet council/prime minister</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minister</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary and deputy secretary</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District administrator</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director and deputy director</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army officer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal officer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief executive officer/finance/bank manager/officers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human resource manager</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auditor/anti-corruption commissioner</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager (corporation)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Nations Development Programme/United Nations Conference on Trade and Development/World Trade Organization employee</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel manager</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program officer/planning officer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal/teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businessperson</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protocol officer</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local cultural officer/tourist guide</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticorruption officer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultant/researcher</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing manager</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judge</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade officer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.10. Educational Qualifications of Members of the National Assembly and the National Council, 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Qualifications/Degree</th>
<th>National Assembly</th>
<th>National Council</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s (graduates)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s (undergraduates)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 4.11. Countries Where Members of National Assembly and National Council of 2013 Studied

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>National Assembly</th>
<th>National Council</th>
<th>Total for Both the Houses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States of America</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Country where they have received their highest degree is taken for the purpose of tabulation.

The above tables cogitate on the profile of the members of the National Council and the National Assembly. It mirrors that 90 percent are former royal bureaucrats who have studied under government scholarship or through in-service training and education as civil servants. The majority of the members have graduate degrees. What does this presage for Bhutan? Bhutan has a limited pool of highly educated people. What has motivated and mesmerized these highly qualified people to politics? Numerous sources including debates in the National Assembly and the National Council in 2014 revealed that the majority of the bureaucrats are attracted to politics to contest the elections mainly due to perks and benefits associated with it. The members of parliament perceive it as a beneficial rent-seeking space rather than a bureaucracy.\textsuperscript{150} It has been observed that the members in Bhutan look at the microdynamics to decide to enter the politics and contest the election. Tshering Chophel notes: “We have people, who are attracted to status or perks, take the post of our parliament as well as local governments.”\textsuperscript{151} Also they are the only privileged candidates with required qualifications to contest the royal election.

To neutralize the threats to their rule that emerge from within society, autocrats attempt to coopt or, in the language of O’Donnell, “encapsulate” the potential opposition.\textsuperscript{152} Nominally democratic institutions in Bhutan such as political parties and legislatures are created to maintain control of the state. Parties and legislatures have provided an avenue through which kings coopt potential opponents, distribute rents to supporters, and mitigate elite conflicts. Elections in authoritarian states come in many different forms, and too often we analyze them without paying sufficient attention to the microdynamics at play.

In order to understand elections in any regime, I argue that we need to analyze the key component in any election: “candidates.” I argue that these tendencies have kept political scientists from asking a wide range of questions about the microlevel dynamics of authoritarian elections and the ways in which they differ systematically from each other.\textsuperscript{153} The profile of members of parliament show that it is more a bureaucracy in extension as almost 90 percent of the members are drawn from the pool of former civil servants and cabinet ministers of King Jigme (K4). Kuensel notes: “Civil service might be a huge reserve for political parties to draw candidates from. . . . Meanwhile, some of those working to form political parties, who have ventured on a candidate hunt for months, said key agencies must come together to create an enabling environment for good political parties to be formed.”\textsuperscript{154} The civil servants are made to resign from bureaucracy and asked to establish political parties with sole objectives to keep
sway on future politics and political parties. This reflects that there are hardly any new faces in democracy. Femia argues that “the inevitability of elite rule makes democracy an imaginary dream. Elites can never be accountable to the people. There is an inverse relationship between elites and democracy so that institutions proclaimed to be democratic are in reality exercise in futility.”

Thus, in Bhutan, real, political power does not rest with peoples’ representatives. It is rather concentrated in the hand of the network of high-level bureaucrats, judges, top military officers, aristocrats, royalists, and business elites. In other words, it is concentrated in the network monarchy—a common clique in academic circles. The king has successfully coopted with educated elite Bhutanese, who have mostly studied abroad under government scholarships as members of parliament. These elites also shifted from bureaucracy to king-controlled politics as they are better paid off than in the bureaucracy. Linz and Stepan say consolidation occurs when democracy is “the only game in town,” which is when it is behavioral, attitudinal, and constitutionally internalized by the political elites and the majority of the population. It becomes behaviorally accepted, with democratic principles used to attain objectives, and attitudinally internalized, when all democratic principles are widely accepted as the most credible means of conducting politics. Lastly, it becomes constitutionally internalized when all rules and laws written down are adhered to. The GNH survey shows that 64 percent of the respondents of more than seven thousand interviewed have poor knowledge of the difference between the National Council and the National Assembly. Almost 59 percent said that they had poor knowledge and understanding of the roles and responsibilities of parliament members. A total of 62 percent of the respondents have poor knowledge and understanding of the constitution. More females had poor knowledge and understanding of the constitution, legislative bodies, and the roles and responsibilities of members of parliament, and the lack of knowledge and understanding was more prominent in rural Bhutan, where more than 85 percent of the population is residing. A lawmaker described the relationship between the members of parliament and the party’s president as a “traditional teacher-student” relationship. “We are like students in front of prime minister,” he said, adding that the decisions are taken irrespective of feedback and suggestions the party cadres give to the leadership. Former elites have just changed their color to become façade democrats without transforming themselves. This is mainly due to that fact the election can be contested by any person who has a university degree. The regime introduced a ridiculous and outrageous stipulation in the
Election Act, as a prerequisite eligibility criterion (i.e., candidates aiming to contest elections to the parliament must have a university degree). Kuensel notes: “The recent Royal Civil Service Commission records show a total strength of 25,310 civil servants, of which 67 percent are male and 33 percent female. Only 7,000 of the total have completed university, a degree one must hold to be eligible for candidacy.”

The exclusion provision of the Election Act means that 90 percent of the population is excluded from representing their people in the parliament and will never be able to contribute actively toward nation-building. Thus, patriotic, experienced, and loyal nationalists have legally been denied any role in determining the polity of the nation. This has happened because both the kings (K4 and K5) understand that past policies have created dissatisfactions among a large section of the population. If these people get an opportunity in any democratic setup, monarchs would be cornered and there would be a looming recalcitrance. Therefore, the king allowed only his bureaucratic cronies to participate in the political process, because they were hand-in-glove in the past policies and benefits. In democracies, political parties, interest groups, private nonprofit organizations, and other institutions and procedures are instruments for autonomous societal interest aggregation and articulation, and to encapsulate, in a Tocquevillean sense, the civic and political liberties that constitute the very nature of democratic politics. Obviously, this is not what authoritarian leaders have in mind. It is therefore not enough to look at a given formal institutional framework; rather, we have to examine the functions they fulfill in an authoritarian polity.

Thus the king suppressed the latent disquiet and dissent in the educated middle class by accommodating and offering a share of royal democracy pie. Carothers, in an attempt to simplify the plethora of democratic descriptors, identifies two strands of political syndrome: “feckless pluralism,” where participation remains shallow and troubled, and where political elites are perceived as self-interested and ineffective. This also explains why we discern serving ministers, bureaucrats, and other forming political parties and competing in an election even today. There is a cooptation of economic and political actors. The former refers to the inclusion of business elites as a new pillar of the regime. In the political arena, cooptation is one of the core functions of imitative formal institutions—parliaments, new political parties, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and so on that has emerged in the context of political liberalization. In Bhutan, such institutions serve as tools for creating networks and loyalties and as
channels for upward social mobility. Thus, gaining a parliamentary seat in Bhutan today means immunity; access to incumbents with decision-making power; the possibility of building up networks of loyalty, dependency, and patronage at the royal level; and facilitated access to information that can be used for achieving material benefits.

However, there is no denying the fact that even among the educated team, there are members from a modest middle-class family background. I argue that a weak Bhutanese state marks the historical continuity of a paradoxical yet somehow coherent phenomenon: a weak state that consists of a strong centralized power and an unrestricted bureaucracy and strong monarchy with absolutely weak democratic institutions. There is a large measure of elite influences, which may lead to instability and stalemate. In reality, the king has handed down the day-to-day affairs of the state to his own ministers and bureaucrats, who have changed color to show democratic credentials. It is ironic to note that those who are fighting for inclusive peoples’ democracy since the 1990s are excluded from the whole process and denied their return to Bhutan from exile.

**Media and Freedom of Press**

A free and independent media, both in broadcast and print, is an essential component of democracy. A skilled independent media can provide citizens with essential political and economic information and analysis, encourage informed dialogue between policymakers and citizens, and demand accountability from political structures. The media and access to political information is unconvincing and very thin in Bhutan. The constitutional rights to free expression and freedom of the press and other media are severely restricted in practice, especially with respect to the dissemination of information around political issues. The king has the power to revoke constitutional guarantees to freedom of expression and freedom of the press at his discretion. Publishing criticism of the royal family is banned, and self-censorship in the media is thought to be widespread, as journalists are routinely subjected to threats by the authorities.

One of the most common ways that the government and elites exert pressure on the media is through defamation laws and libel suits.\(^{161}\) Frohardt and Temin have explored that abuse of media is most likely when: “all or a significant portion of media outlets are owned by one or a small number of people, particularly if those people are of the same ethnicity or religion, support the same political party, or are from the same region.”\(^{162}\) The Bhutan Government has found
various ways to stifle and control the independent media such as censorship, threat, and harassment. The threat of withdrawal of state subsidies or advertising revenues common in transition countries is also an effective manipulating and controlling tool.

On freedom of expression, Dahl states that “freedom of expression is required in order for citizens to participate effectively in political life.” To attain an “enlightened understanding” on government actions and policies requires freedom of expression. Dahl contends that:

in order to attain civic competence, citizens need opportunities to express their own views, learn from one another, engage in discussion and deliberation, read, hear and question experts, political candidates and persons whose judgments they trust and learn in other ways that depend on freedom of expression.

Dahl states that in the absence of freedom of expression, citizens would gradually lose their capacity to influence the “agenda of government decisions.” On the issue of the availability of alternative and independent sources of information, citizens must be in a position to attain another source of information that is not under the government’s control or dominated by a certain section of the population or interest groups. There have to be different sources of information to widen the scope of effective participation. The increasing influence over the public agenda, press freedom, and democracy are strongly connected and mutually reinforcing. Mass media fulfills an essential function of democracy as a link between the citizens and their potential representation. The report of Journalists Association of Bhutan (August 2014) has identified that privatization of media started off with a bang with the advent of royal democracy. But today, less than a decade later, it is so fragile that it could end with a whimper.

Since privatization in 2006, the number of media houses reached sixteen, from the otherwise two state-owned media houses—Bhutan Broadcasting Service Corporation and Kuensel Corporation limited. Of the twelve newspapers today, eleven are privately owned; many are on the verge of collapse due to a dearth of funds to operate. The study of Journalists Association of Bhutan in its first ever report published in 2014 states that “the dependence of media outlets on government advertising for sustainability caused the sector to plunge into financial trouble. To add to that, the budgetary deficit faced by the government, starting 2012, led to cutback in public expenditure, including advertisement. Most media houses are on the brink of bankruptcy and closure.” All rolled off the press in the past few years, after the first two private papers, Bhutan Times
and *Bhutan Observer*, hit the market in 2006. However, sustainability has always been an issue, ever since the private papers came into the market. Being the least popular of conventional media in a population that does not like to read, not much has stopped new startups. At least three or four newspapers are alleged to be owned by the same people, opened with a strategy to target different audiences and pool in advertisement revenue.

Dahl contends that “silent citizens may be perfect subjects for an authoritarian ruler; they would be a disaster for a democracy.” This means that Bhutanese citizens should have the right to make their views known to the elected representatives without any form of hindrance and on any issue concerning the conduct of the government. Heywood warns against the ability of the media to influence and shape political attitudes, which can influence politics and electoral choice through shaping public perceptions on “the nature and importance of issues and problems.” The Bhutanese media is not doing enough. The media has not done adequately to give people voice.

Dahl notes that “free expression means not just that you have a right to be heard. It means that you have a right to hear what others have to say.” Mass media is outside the international boundary of Bhutan. The most reported news is drawn from government sources, more of a top-down approach, rather incorporating opinions from the grassroots. This has limited the ordinary Bhutanese’s knowledge of democracy and obstructed any chance for further democratic experimentation other than what has been provided in their political system. Their information and knowledge about the world are mostly limited to the confines of the mostly government-controlled mass media.

The Bhutanese media censors itself according to the report of “Media Development Assessment 2010” published by the Ministry of Information and Communications. For an example of self-censorship, the media do not cover stories critical of the royal family, the government, the clergy, Bhutanese refugees, and so forth. No journalists have the nerve to cover stories critical of the royal family because s/he would be charged with treason, for going against the Tsa-Wa-Sum (king, people, and country). The security and legal authority in Bhutan doesn’t differentiate between the king and the royal family separately. Kai Bird states: Thimphu has a free press. But it is a press that observes two cultural taboos: criticism of the royal family and discussion of what happened to the Lhotshampas. How long can that last? Critical stories on the clergy would invite allegations of disturbing the harmony between different religious communities. Likewise, highlighting the rights of Bhutanese refugees would
invite the accusation for being anti-national and promoting enmity between different communities and disturbing the harmony and tranquility of communities. These charges have been leveled before against many individuals, who are currently serving long-term prison sentences. Kuensel claims that: “Covering critical stories rubbed off a feeling of being unsafe. About 58 percent of working and 62 percent of former journalists felt unsafe to cover critical stories, because they feared reprisals, lack of adequate skills, objection from management and small society syndrome. But these are not just feelings; journalists have actually been threatened.”

The constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan guarantees the right to free speech, opinion, and expression. However, the National Security Act of 1992 prohibits criticism of the king and the political system. Thus, freedom is subject to the authority’s definitions laid down in the restrictive press laws. Kuensel notes: There has been no support from the government, in terms of policy interventions and provisions of incentives for quality journalism. Unsustainable economics of the media industry, absence of quality journalism and censorship are the main causes. The existing media legislation and policies failed to ensure media development in the country. The critique of the political system is often perceived or interpreted as a slur against the Tsa-Wa-Sum and government. The constitution also guarantees the right to information, but efforts to pass a right to information act, which would put into effect the provisions in the constitution, stalled in 2011. A 2006 media law led to the establishment of two independent radio stations, but it did not provide specific protections for journalists or guarantee freedom of information. The state-owned Kuensel and two independent weeklies, the Bhutan Times and the Daily Observer, generally publish pro-government information without criticism of the government.

Freedom of speech and expression is constrained by the draconian National Security Act, enacted and adopted in 1992. Kuensel says that: Coupled with this is the constraint of working in a system, where press freedom is guaranteed in the Constitution, but is not a reality. Fifty percent of the working journalists said, in practice, there was no press freedom. Former journalists, 45 percent of them, felt the same. Unless the National Security Act of 1992 is repealed by the parliament, no Bhutanese, let alone journalists, would come forth freely to express their minds. Until then, media “self-censorship” will continue.

In February 2010, the monarchy announced the establishment of the Bhutan Media Foundation. However, many journalists expressed fears that the foundation would be used by the monarchy to impede the independence of
media outlets. Lately, journalists in Bhutan are accusing the government of targeting and victimizing newspapers that are critical of the government. The government has stopped issuing advertisements to the papers, as a result of which media houses are on brink of closure. The government advertisements make up more than 80 percent of the newspapers’ revenues. The Ministry of Information and Communications, on April 2, 2012, had issued a circular stamped “Confidential” in red, directing all Ministry of Information and Communications departments not to provide any advertisements, announcements, notifications, circulars, and so forth, to Bhutanese newspapers that had carried out several critical stories of the government. The government-owned Kuensel and Bhutan Broadcasting Service continues to receive financial support from the government, including advertisements.175

The Bhutan Information, Communications and Media Authority (BICMA) officials provided a list of 18,155 books on its website as an attempt at censorship. The BICMA had clarified that it had required all bookstores to submit a list of books available for sale in their establishments, as part of an effort to comply with the Information, Communications and Media Act of 2006. Section 95 of the act requires that every book for sale or distribution in the country is to be registered with the authority. The information and communications minister may declare a book detrimental to the interests of the sovereignty, security, unity, and integrity of the country as per Section 100 of the Information, Communications and Media Act of 2006.176 Such measures of the royal government have stifled the growth of the media industry. Kuensel, in its editorial on August 23, 2014, contends that:

It indicates that the media in Bhutan is not given the space to grow and play their part as they must. The existing media policies do not encourage growth. For a small country like ours, with just about [seven hundred thousand] people, we have [eleven] newspapers, to say nothing about radios and television. The number of media against audience is just too much. This happened because our policymakers tend to think of media business like any other business. It is a pity that media in our country is treated like a tomato in the street market.177

In an apolitical society like Bhutan, the mass media should be more critical about the government’s policies rather than just acting as the mouthpiece of the government. It should take responsibility for political education and socialization. Bhutan should be open to political criticism. Both the supporters and the critics of the system should be encouraged to vent their views without any fear or favor. With a closed society, where the freedom of the press is still very narrow and fragile, and the government can influence and decide what
people should know and what the world outside should be aware of, the lack of information and government restrictions make it difficult to investigate the media puzzle in Bhutan. To make any changes effective and congruent with democracy, people’s participation at the grassroots level should be encouraged. To achieve this, all Bhutanese should be granted full freedom of speech and expression. Otherwise, any changes will be cosmetic.

**Politics and Violations of Human Rights in the Royal Democracy**

Basic human rights are fundamental to all human beings. Betham notes that a democratization outlook requires that human rights and basic needs are “available to all citizens equally under law, and that they are guaranteed even in the face of contingent electoral or parliamentary majority.”

Inclusive citizenship entails that everybody who resides in a country is subject to its laws and cannot be discriminated against, or denied the rights enjoyed by all members of the society. These include the right to vote in the election of public representatives, the right to contest for public office, the right to freedom of expression, as well as the right to form and participate in independent political organizations. The rights included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are extensive.

Human rights violations are ubiquitous in Bhutan today. There are some critical aspects of the constitution which restrict human and citizen rights. The constitution identifies three types of citizenship. Only the natural-born citizens shall enjoy all rights within the political system. Those who have citizenship by registration and citizenship by naturalization are not entitled to take part in all aspects of public life especially with respect to constitutional offices. This concept, in fact, suggests different classes of citizens. This violates the principle of equality, which is an important basis for the concept of democracy. An enormous array of rights is effectively denied to a large percentage of the country’s minority population, which may find it next to impossible to establish or obtain citizenship because of these religious, linguistic, and cultural aspects in the citizenship and fundamental rights provisions that are highly discriminatory. This automatically, almost irreversibly, has serious flaws and consequences in terms of land rights, access to services, employment, and even educational opportunities. The Bhutan human rights dossier includes socioeconomic concerns as well as the gamut of civil and political rights abuses, among them torture and ill treatment, disappearances, political imprisonment, unfair trials,
incommunicado detention, and restrictions on freedoms of association and press. 
Aris notes:

The principal requirement of a king, the Kathrim (legal code) states, is the fair discharge of state law. The laws that he discharges should be in accordance with Dharma. This is the basis of happiness. The bastion of Dharma is the Sangha, the monastic community. Thus, we see that the relationship between kingship and Dharma is established at the very beginning. “Buddha-hood comes from a reigning king.” The requirement for kings to administer law in accordance with the Dharma does not prevent them from taking harsh measures, when need arise. Criminals are to be punished and enemies destroyed. Military vigilance is advised as an important aspect of statecraft.180

However, the unending exile of about one-sixth of the population (Lhotsampas and Sharchops), combined with the denial of civil and political rights to their ethnic kin within the country, speaks silently about equality and political tolerance and administering the law by the king as per Buddha Dharma. Ben Peterson notes:

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 election even more insulting. The accepted media line revolved around how encouraging and refreshing to see a “benevolent dictator” give up some powers for the good of modernizing of the country.181

The opposition in exile and refugees are not allowed to return. In the eleventh Donors Round Table Meeting in Thimphu, the statement by the Danish delegation stated that, “We urge Bhutan to show leadership and to revitalize the bilateral process, and in particular to consider—also on humanitarian grounds—the voluntary return of those refugees, who wish to do so, as part of a comprehensive resolution. As a new democracy, Bhutan would be served well—for its own sake—to heal this rift of the past and demonstrate that inclusion is a central feature of Bhutanese society and your democracy.”

The nostalgic sentiments of the exotic mythical land have made Bhutan a subject of interest to journalists, politicians, diplomats, academicians, and the common man alike today. Western academics have turned Bhutan’s GNH into a conference and tourism industry. Patrick emphatically tells us: “Over the past decade, Bhutan has become a ‘Mecca or Shangri-la’ for Western policy makers and development experts seeking enlightenment on the secrets of national happiness. Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel laureates both are converts. So too is Jeffrey Sachs, Director of Earth Center Institute at Columbia University.”182 It is ironic to note that the United Nations General Assembly, in August 2011, passed Resolution 65/309 titled “Happiness: Towards a Holistic Approach to Development,” endorsing Bhutan’s basic points of GNH as a development paradigm to reflect the happiness and well-being in a country. In
April 2012, a high-level meeting, “Well-being and Happiness: Defining a New Economic Paradigm,” raised the GNH concept to new heights. Prince Charles has addressed the event with pre-recorded messages and both Sachs and Stiglitz have spoken alongside national and international dignitaries, including the United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon. Today, the champion of GNH has violated the fundamental human rights of its own citizens, which has been enshrined in the United Nations charter. Even the United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, Prince Charles, and Sachs and Stiglitz could not see the human rights violations and ethnic cleansing of Bhutanese citizens. For Bhutan, United Nations Resolution 65/309 represents a global public relation triumph and realization of goals to camouflage the undercurrents of human rights violations in the country. Glossed over the image as a peaceful Shangri-la or Mecca of GNH, Bhutan has escaped the international scrutiny and censure; with each passing year, reminiscences of the ethnic cleansing wither away, and answerability seems more and more to slither away. De Varennes cautions us that: “Bhutan has not only been geographically and historically speaking an isolated state, it has to some degree isolated itself also from the global human rights regime since it is at the extreme bottom list of states in terms of the international human rights treaties ratified—only two.”

Bhutan has continued steadfastly to refuse any responsibility for expelling its own people and creating a stateless person. The international community has played a very crucial role in the protection and resolution of the Bhutanese refugee problem, importantly third country settlement. But it is still controversial as to whether it is ethically and morally right to give clean chit to the regime for gross violation of human rights and ethnic cleansing its citizens, as this will set precedents for dictators around the world to suppress and ethnically cleanse minorities at the receiving end resembling one in Bhutan. Two and half decades ago, nearly one-sixth of the population was forcibly expelled. How did King Jigme (K4) escape any real censure? Kai Bird states: “by any definition, what happened in Bhutan in the years 1989–93 was ethnic cleansing. The Bhutanese government denies this and has refused to repatriate any of those forcibly expelled.” With the international community preoccupied with other crises, King Jigme (K4) escaped any real censure from the international community. Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, one of his four queens (all sisters), described her husband as a “wise king whose unique philosophy of governance measures the country’s progress and development not by its gross domestic product . . . but its gross national happiness (GNH).” The king’s remarkable public relations
machine has indeed used the GNH moniker to garner worldwide praise for Bhutan’s rapid economic development.

Contemporary international standards on minority protection include a wide range of legally binding international treaties (convention, covenant) and legally non-binding declarations. Among these instruments, the followings are of greater importance in the context and content of Bhutan. Does the Government of Bhutan intend to accede to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol? Has the Government of Bhutan considered issuing a standing invitation to the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council? Which steps is the Government of Bhutan taking or preparing to counter violence against children and in particular of unaccompanied and separated refugee children? What specific measures has the Government of Bhutan adopted or is preparing to ensure national implementation of its international obligations of the international human rights treaties (e.g., to ensure protection of the right to privacy and non-discrimination, in particular of women and persons of minority sexual orientation or gender identity)? Does the government ratify the four core United Nations conventions on human rights (civil and political rights [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights]), economic, social and cultural rights (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), torture (Convention against Torture), and racial discrimination (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination)? How will the government continue to work on improving the equal treatment of all ethnic minorities, which also is part of institutionalizing the Bhutanese democracy?

Bhutan does not have rejoinders to these questions as it is not a party to International Instruments and Mechanisms except two: the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989. International Instruments for the Protection of Minorities, to which Bhutan is not a party, include the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol; a standing invitation to the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council; United Nations conventions on human rights (civil and political rights [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights]; economic, social, and cultural rights [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights]; torture [Convention against Torture]; and racial discrimination [Committee on the Elimination of Racial

Bhutan is also not a party to International Mechanisms for the Protection of Minorities, which includes the Convention on the Rights of the Commission on Human Rights (until 2006) and Human Rights Council (since 2006) 1989; the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (until 2007) and Human Rights Council Advisory Committee (since 2007); the Working Group on Minorities (until 2007) and Forum on Minority Issues (since 2007); and the Independent Expert on Minority Issues and Human Rights treaty bodies.

Bhutan also does not respect the established rights under the international law of minorities, which include protection of existence and identity; right to equality and non-discrimination; right to religious, linguistic, and cultural autonomy; right of participation; right to contacts; and right to association. This goes contrary to the basic and fundamental rights of the minority populations as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.186

In Bhutan, lionizing the king connotes adoring the nation, and opposing the king means betraying the country and working for foreign agents. The present political structures and system reveal the lack of accommodating attitude toward the problem. Moreover, the presence of hardliners in the government, parliament, and royal court has left very little scope for a conciliatory approach toward the opposition and refugees in exile. The most vocal critics of the government remain in exile. Under Article 7, the fundamental civil rights of all Bhutanese are set out and guaranteed. These include freedom of speech, opinion, and expression, and the right to vote. Exiled opposition groups argue that notwithstanding the terms of Article 7, the Lhotsampa refugees lack recognition and are discriminated against by Article 6, while the Lhotsampas, Sharchops, and even non-ruling Ngalungs are subjected to indirect discrimination and bigotry. Especially when dealing with minorities, there may have been the mistaken belief that there are no standards relevant in Bhutan since it has not ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which is a main international treaty that contains a specific minority provision, Article 27.13. Article 27 states: “In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own
culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language.” The reason this is important is that Bhutan, having ratified both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, cannot discriminate against these two groups and generally must ensure that the basic human rights of women and children are applied. This would apply to women and children who also happen to be members of a minority, and especially to Nepali-speaking individuals. Additionally, because fundamental rights and freedoms such as freedom of religion and the prohibition of racial discrimination are also part of customary law, Bhutan must comply with these regardless of the status of its ratification of a particular treaty. The Freedom House in its recommendation in 2012 states that, “The government need to find a permanent solution to the Lhoutsampa questions including full restitution of citizenship rights for Lhoutsampas within the country and resolution to the refugee crisis for the Lhoutsampas living in refugee camps in eastern Nepal.” The political parties and organizations that emerged during the 1990s have no legal status in Bhutan. Internally, legislation continues to restrict citizenship, thereby preventing them from participating in elections. Human Rights Watch reported that the government excluded 13 percent of the Nepali-speaking population from voting because they were considered “non-nationals” in the 2005 census.

To recite all the human rights infringements that have been reported throughout the king’s rule in the 1990s and 2000s would be a long and superfluous undertaking for which there is no room here. For the purpose of these arguments, an illustration of recent violations will suitably suffice. Ferrara notes: In contemporary political discourse, culture is the only word, whose international currency rivals democracy. Culture commands more respect than dictatorship and oppression, it is frequently called upon to mask.187 Bhutan has used culture to mask its human rights violations. There are reported instances of not allowing people having a different religion to practice their faith despite that right being written into the constitution. The constitution guarantees freedom of religious practices to all faiths on paper, but in practice, it is restricted by various laws. They believed that changing faith particularly to Christian would increase a “Pandora’s box” of individual choice more dangerous and unpredictable than organized religion under state patronage. They contend that the Christians do not worship idols unlike Buddhists, which will grind down their religion, if they allow Christianity to proliferate in the state patronage Buddhist country. There
were some reports of abuses, including religious prisoners or detainees, in the country.

On October 6, 2011, according to the media, a court sentenced Prem Singh Gurung, a Nepali-speaking Christian, to three years in prison for “an attempt to promote civil unrest.” Authorities had arrested Gurung in May for showing a film with Christian content. Gurung was charged with violating the Bhutan Information, Communication, and Media Act of 2006. Sections 105(1) and 110 of this law require that the authority review all films before public screening.188

The government made statements promoting religious tolerance, especially of Christians. However, in September 2014, Christians News reported that Tandin Wangyal and M. B. Thapa were sentenced to three years and eleven months and two years and four months, respectively, in prison on September 10. The crime of Thapa was his invitation to Wangyal to a gathering without seeking prior permission from the authority. Wangyal was found guilty of accepting US$11,864 as a funding from a foreign Christian organization to run his ministry activities. They were arrested from Dorokha, while attending a foundation-laying ceremony. The police confiscated Wangyal’s laptop hard drive, mobile phone, and movie projector. However, Tandin Wangyal was released on bail after paying a $763 fine, whereas Thapa failed to pay the US$1,678 fine and was sent to prison.189

On one hand, freedom of religion is guaranteed by the constitution, but the restrictive laws, like the National Security Act, prohibit “words either spoken or written, or by other mean whatsoever, that promote or attempt to promote, on grounds of religion, race, language, caste, or community, or on any other ground whatsoever, feelings of enmity or hatred between different religious, racial, or language groups or castes and communities.” Violating the National Security Act is punishable by up to three years in prison. On paper, there is a provision that “if the person thinks that his/her right under any of the fundamental rights is breached, then she/he has the right to initiate proceedings before the court for the enforcement of his/her right.” However, the court is also indistinguishable face of the Jigmecracy managed by same genus of people. The Chhoedey Lhentshog (religious government organization) did not register any Christian groups. The Christian groups claimed that the religious meetings had to be held discreetly. Some Christian congregations had four hundred to five hundred members and met in non-religiously labeled private buildings.

In another interesting case, the Election Commission of Bhutan decreed that after January 1, 2013, the public, including religious organizations and
personalities, shall not conduct, organize, or host religious events and activities that would involve presence of public. Kuensel notes: For almost half of next year, individuals and religious organizations should refrain from engaging in religious events and activities that would involve “presence of public.” . . . This should be observed until the completion of parliamentary elections next year, which, going by recent calculations, would be until July.\textsuperscript{190} This is direct infringement of people’s rights to freedom of religion to practice as past records reveal spates of religious activities, including annual festivals, local rituals, and offerings are up during the period. Thus, the end results are paradoxical indeed: belief in the equal worth and respectability of all cultures is transferred through the trivialization of the complexity of those very cultural systems—into an apology for dictators, who often have little sympathy for cultural minorities, little time for opinions contrary to their own, and little patience for the plight of their own people.\textsuperscript{191} The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, but in practice, the government limited this freedom, based on its determination that religious activity interfered with the country’s identity and stability. The trend in the government’s respect for religious freedom did not change significantly up to today. However, the government continued to deny religious figures’ voting rights and the right to run for public office, a practice the government defended as necessary because of the constitutional principle of separating religion from politics. However, the king is upholder of the foundation of both religion and politics. Article 2.2 states, “The Chhoe-sid-nyi of Bhutan shall be unified in the person of the Druk Gyalpo, who as a Buddhist shall be the upholder of the Chhoe-sid. As a Buddhist, the King embodies both the religious (chhoe) and the political (sid).”\textsuperscript{192} There were unconfirmed reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including in rural areas and in schools. There was societal pressure on non-Buddhists to uphold the “Buddhist spiritual heritage” of the country, including participating in Buddhist prayers and rituals.\textsuperscript{193}

Bhutan has failed to address the issue of political prisoners, many of whom have been tortured and killed in prisons. The countries at Crossroads 2012 published by Freedom House claim that “There have been reports however that the officials use torture in Bhutan’s prison, particularly with political dissident. Even a few of those who are released under international pressure recount the story of severe torture using mind control devices.” The Society for Threatened Peoples reported to the United Nations Human Rights Council that at least two hundred political prisoners remained imprisoned in the country. According to
media reports, in 2011/2012, expatriates from Europe and the Western hemisphere submitted petitions to various human rights organizations and representatives, including the United Nations secretary general, seeking assistance in obtaining the release of hundreds of political prisoners, naming eighty-nine prisoners specifically. The petitioners alleged that some political prisoners were held incommunicado and that international observers like the International Red Cross Society were denied access to them. It is also a conventional modus operandi of the royal government to shift the political prisoners from one prison to another during the visit of international observers.

Between 1990 and 2014, there were more than a hundred deaths of political prisoners in police custody, and today hundreds of political prisoners from the South and East of Bhutan are in prisons under inhuman conditions. It has been alleged that there is a denial of voting rights to those who have been released from the jails. This is serious violations of the basic rights of a citizen. The country’s Citizenship Act, which authorizes the government to seize a person’s citizenship certificate if he or she acted against the government, is still in force. Under this system, those released from the jails are liable to be restricted from voting rights. This is particularly disturbing because anyone who wants to return from exile will have to face the same indistinguishable fate as they are declared as anti-national across the board and much shoddier than prisoners in Bhutanese jails.

There is a report that Sangla Drukpa’s wife and children are still denied their citizenship. Sangla Drukpa joined an exiled political party in 1996 after he learned that his brother was murdered in cold blood by the government for demanding human rights and democracy. He tried several avenues to seek justice for his murdered brother, but in vain. On February 6, 2002, the Kuensel reported that Sangla Drukpa was arrested on February 5 in Bhutan. This was a barefaced tall tale. As soon as his arrest in India was known to Bhutanese authorities through the Indian media, the Bhutanese security in the blink of an eye availed of his release on bail for non-bail-able offenses from the Siliguri Magistrate and whisked him away to Bhutan. On April 4, the Bhutanese high court decreed his life imprisonment. Sangla Drukpa, a political leader serving life imprisonment in Bhutan, died on April 28, 2011, at the Thimphu Referral Hospital. The doctor declared brain hemorrhage as the cause of death. He was sixty-four. While in prison, his wife and children were denied access to see him. The duty police officer denied his existence. Even when he was at the threshold of death, the official simply didn’t inform the family members. Only after his death did the
police authorities contact his family to dispose of the dead body. Knowing the cruel summary ways of the royal regime, it is anybody’s guess if this death was the outcome of prolonged torture—consequentially murder—or not. All this was taking place right under the nose of the “royal elected government” and after the “promulgation of the royal democratic constitution.” Sangla Drukpa’s treatment sums up the cold attitude and apathy of the royal government and the police, and the treatment that is meted out to political prisoners or anti-nationals in Bhutan today.

The illustrious fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution are useless for ordinary Bhutanese as they are circumvented as per the regime’s interest. The situation is especially so under the leadership of the current police chief, Kipchu Namgyal, a royal relative, who has had a stint as one of the intelligence officials targeting political dissidents and their groups, prior to his present post, and continues to enjoy direct access to the very top, unlike his predecessor. The police use constitutional rights selectively.

The connivance of the Indian security officials and Bhutanese security was once again repeated when Tenzing Gawa Zangpo, a Bhutanese dissident leader, was arrested on November 10, 2008, in Assam for his purported role in Assam bomb blast. He was granted bail by two Central Bureau of Investigation courts on March 30 and 31, 2009. He was released on April 6 at around 5:30 p.m. from the Gawahati Jail. Bhutanese security officials along with Indian security officials rearrested him in the court premises within a few minutes and whisked him away to Bhutan. Presently, it has been alleged that he is lodged in the Central Jail in Thimphu. Tenzing is being tried for several charges in Bhutan’s high court. His friends and exiled Bhutanese community fear the royal government will get rid of him physically through torture in due course. The continued incarceration by the present regime shows that it is not a democracy with democrats but manifestation of the previous regime. Bhutan Today notes: “The corrupt, who are friendly with those in high places, can walk free, despite the Judiciary sentencing them to prison. And the innocent, despite being on the right side of the law, are imprisoned, because they are on the wrong side of the fence.” In Bhutan, to be an opposition or be in rebellion against the authority of the monarchy invites callous punishment under the National Security Law, which makes criticism of the government a serious crime. Legally, it is not possible to be in real opposition.

The right to freedom of association is set out under Article 7(12) of the constitution but does not specially provide for a right to peaceful demonstrations.
Article 15(4) reflects the prohibition on the formation of political parties based on ethnicity, religion, or region. Karl Witffogel notes that the successful autocracies must engage in effective control regardless of what constitutional constraints are inscribed on paper.196 Thus, internally legislation continues to restrict citizenship, thereby preventing potential veto players from participating in politics and elections.

The human rights record of the Royal Government of Bhutan is poor, and human rights are not protected to any significant degree in the country. While the 2008 constitution contains a number of human rights provisions, the document itself—and even its human rights provisions—is highly discriminatory and reflects extreme forms of ethnic and racial preferences. The constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan systemically enshrines the violation of some of the most fundamental of human rights, many of which are also part of international customary law. A number of provisions of the two treaties which Bhutan has ratified are also violated: in the case of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the constitution is clearly inconsistent with, for example, Article 7(2) (freedom of expression), Article 7(4) (freedom of religion), Article 7(12) (freedom of association), and so forth. These are the most severe obstacles for thousands of Bhutanese individuals. Even to get a citizenship card, people have to show a security clearance certificate. Kuensel notes: “College graduates require security clearance for job application and other purposes and students, who are above [fifteen] years, are also applying for security clearance to process their citizenship identity cards since it is their summer break.”197 It is interesting to note that citizenship is renewable in Bhutan based on loyalty to the king and the ruling government, which is incongruent in other parts of the world as it is considered the basic birth right of human beings.198 Barma, Ratner, and Spector’s research reveals that the authoritarianism regime has embraced engagement in international systems in a specific way that duly enables their success and shields them from pressure for domestic political reforms.199 The fundamental rights of an individual can never be caged in custody, intending to meet the vested interest of a handful of the elites, nor a citizen’s right be made a political card. True democracy and respect toward democratic norms will only be meaningful if “equity” in practice is shown irrespective of class, creed, color, race, and religious beliefs.200

And yet, the regime has tried to fool the international community using the name royal democracy. The Bhutanese regime attempts to maintain a democratic façade for the sake of internal stability and international consumption and image.
making. In this kingdom of fairy tales, everything is unparalleled and legal if done by royalists and monarchists, and becomes anti-national if done by others having opposing views. As stated in the introduction of this chapter, the concept of basic civil liberties is confined to the tenets of freedom of speech, assembly, and association. These three tenets are commonly understood as laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which stipulates that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”\(^{201}\) In addition to these provisions regarding the freedom of opinion and expression, Article 20 maintains the tenets of freedom of assembly and association. It has been established beyond doubt that Bhutan does not protect and respect these core democratic principles, as the country’s government is constitutionally and often also practically in a position subordinate to that of non-elected head. In short, it can be concluded that despite the fact that the core democratic principles of basic civil liberties are understood as the freedom of speech, association, and assembly and are protected in the constitution, and although advances have been made with regard to the status of the basic civil liberties, these core democratic principles are still not respected in practice in Bhutan.

**Civil Society in Bhutan**

Interest groups are a critical component of pluralism. Civil society is believed to be a prerequisite for democracy because “it holds states accountable, represents citizen interests, channels and mediates mass concerns, bolsters an environment of pluralism and trust, and socializes members to the behavior required for successful democracies.”\(^{202}\) There is a theoretical assumption, dominant within democratic theory,\(^{203}\) that there is a strong link between civil society and democracy. In this context, civil society activism is an inherently positive phenomenon and directly contributes to the sustenance of democracy where it exists, and to the weakening of authoritarianism, where democracy is not yet in place. In democratic theory, the concept of civil society is synonymous with liberal and democratic values, as civic engagement is the manifestation of the autonomy of the individual and the organization that she or he decides to belong to. An interest group is a collection of individuals organized to express attitudes or positions held in common in an effort to influence public policy.

Civil society remains weak in Bhutan. A liberal civil society requires a liberal state to institutionally support a sphere for independent political contestation
over the exercise of state power. In the absence of such state support, including support for party political competition, associational life can become an alternative to politics. However, Bhutan is not a liberal state for the growth and promotion of liberal civil society.

On the one hand, democratization studies postulate that a strong civil society is conducive to democracy and is almost necessary to have political transformations. On the other hand, the literature on authoritarian resilience focuses almost exclusively on the mechanisms of state domination and cooptation of civil society, ignoring informal and unofficial loci of dissent and activist movements, presenting therefore a picture of stability that is not there. One could rightfully claim that the Western vision of a civil society is largely absent in Bhutan because autocratic leaders depoliticize their subjects and restrict their capacity to express a critique of governmental policy. The most important factor restricting civil societies’ ability to engender democratic change in Bhutan is that they are embedded in the state by the regime to bolster their hold on power. They have given limited space for civic forms of organization as compared to the past while at the same time containing and regulating them through a combination of legalism, coercion, cooptation, and the appropriation of civil society roles by the government. Consequently, civic activism is low, NGOs sectors are fragmented, and civil society organizations (CSOs) weak in Bhutan. By employing the dual strategy, the king has managed to exploit the rhetoric and organizational framework of civil society to generate political resources that can be used to his advantage.

With the enactment of Civil Society Organizations Act of 2007 and subsequent establishment of the Civil Society Organizations Authority in 2009, the number of CSOs has grown. Presently, there are thirty registered CSOs, of which twenty-four are public benefit organizations and six are mutual benefit organizations. CSOs complement the efforts of the government in provision of certain services that the government is unable to deliver or services that can be delivered more effectively by such organizations. Most of the local NGOs are floated by people who have a close link with people in power and government. Almost all of these organizations are either under patronage of members of the royal family or partners on their activities. For example, Tarayana Foundation is under one of the queen mothers, Ashi Dorji Wangmo, and the Bhutan Youth Development Fund is under another queen mother, Ashi Tshering Pem. No one can cast doubts about their ability to raise healthy contributions and seek funding for the deep pockets of their respective NGOs, when needed. In addition, the
prince and princess have been deputed as the king’s representatives in several NGOs. The health of democracy in a country can be measured by the relative size and quality of its civil society. The royal family’s inroads into Bhutan’s NGO world is an attempt to project the existing farcical democracy as a genuine democracy to the outside world, while the real reason is to keep a resolute royal hold on development funds and curtail NGO activities.208

The CSOs are in areas of education, health, women, children, culture, environmental protection, and private sector development. Recently, several small private organizations have sought to highlight a range of needs, notably around disabilities and the environment. However, these interest groups do not challenge the government or their unjust policies. The *DPID Mission Report 2011 Bhutan* notes that: “but there are still few in the areas of democratic governance, where new ideas can be generated, where there is capacity and willingness to hold those elected to office or appointed to manage accountability.”209 This so-called civil society in Bhutan is often shallower and makes zilch contribution to the promotion of democracy. There are no independent human rights organizations operating in the country. The government considers human rights groups established by the exiled Bhutanese as political organizations and does not permit them to return and operate on Bhutanese soil.

According to international NGOs, local CSOs practiced self-censorship to avoid conflict with the government, and the majority of them focused on women’s rights or environmental issues. The BTI 2012 tells us that: “the formation of civil society is prescribed by invisible hierarchical barriers to consent to criticize. . . . Also only one of the [twenty-eight] members of the civil society authority is from eastern Bhutan.” Despite passage of the Civil Society Organization Act in 2007, the development of civil society has remained lackluster and slow in Bhutan. This considerably complicates the process and requirements for the registration of NGOs. This is perceived as a serious undermining of democracy development process with long-term negative implications.

Ferrara argues that kings—and tin pots of all stripes—have at their disposal a highly portable piece of rhetorical chicanery to spiritualize their rule, identify their personal interests with those of the nation, and elevate themselves to the role of protector—indeed possibility the very embodiment of the rich cultural heritage and time-honored political tradition.210 The most important argument is that the civil society in Bhutan has to escape the subordination to state authority
or governmental manipulation to “contribute to eventual democratization.” Another important factor of such a civil society is that it has to be dispersed in the country and be able to concentrate by demand so that it will be organized for coherent collective political actions. Civil society dynamics are an important indication of the nature of political relationships within any polity. When it comes to Bhutan, such relations are fraught with difficulties and suspicions, leaving one quite pessimistic about the possibility of civil society being a driving force for democratic transformation in the future. Thus, the institutional guarantors of civil society canonized in Western political thought—freedom from personal dependence and arbitrary domination, inviolability of the person and domicile, property rights and the sanctity of contract, the rule of law, and some sort of parliament or assembly of the groups were certainly not features of the Bhutanese Jigmecracy.

**Surfing the Corruptions and Land Scams in the Monarchical Democracy**

The world in 2011/2012 was shaken by an unprecedented wave of mass protests around the globe against established and seemingly unshakable authoritarian regimes. Reportedly, one of the main triggers was rampant corruption. “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.”\(^{211}\) The relationship between regime types and corruption has received considerable research interest, especially in the recent decades. The majority of theoretical inquiries unearth that democracy lowers corruption in a country. In a typical principal-agent framework, citizens charge public officials with a mandate to act in their interests, but are unable to perfectly align incentives.\(^{212}\) When information is imperfect in society, like in Bhutan, public officials may engage in corrupt activities. Bhutan is no exception to this say aloud, as is evident from the discussions below.

The Bhutanese state is a victim of high-level corruption. While the political gladiators constantly manipulated the people and the political processes to advance their own selfish agenda, the society remained pauperized, and the Bhutanese people wallowed in abject poverty. Corruption is endemic in Bhutan today. This has invariably led to weak legitimacy, as the citizens lack faith in their political leaders and, by extension, the political system. Corruption as defined by Rose-Ackerman is the misuse of public power for private gain and basically epitomizes a symptom that something has gone wrong in the management of the state. State institutions designed to govern the state are
contrarily used and manipulated for personal enrichment and the provision of benefits to the corrupt; this nature of corruption is generally referred to as “grand corruption.” Lipset and Lenz define corruption as an “effort to secure wealth or power through illegal means—private gain at public expense. Tanzi believes that corruption occurs in every human endeavor and is often difficult to observe because acts of corruption do not typically take place in broad daylight. This description combines political and bureaucratic officials. People might assume that only politicians in government are corrupt. Most often, bureaucrats provide the templates for perfecting corruption, as seen in Bhutan today. In fact, most corrupt practices are only exposed by bureaucrats when they are excluded from sharing in the proceeds.

Bhutan presents a veritable case for understanding the connection between corruption and political malaise. Patron-client relationships took a prime role over the formal aspects of politics in Bhutan. As a starting point, it is worth noting, however impolitic, that the royal family owns much of Bhutan. The royal family members are said to be the country’s largest landowners and have a controlling interest in many companies. Manipulation of its wealth is central to the way the monarchy controls the political game. Privately, elites exchange stories of interventions of the king and royal family members to confiscate land and property or to award it at royal discretion. A new cadastral survey of land implemented in times of crisis in the South, for example, has permitted the palace to allocate land and secure commensurate political support. It is an advantage to the palace that the Bhutan elite is small; intermarriage within it assures close contact and gives the king access to politically valuable information about his most esteemed subjects. King Jigme (K4) has not hesitated to use personal idiosyncrasies and interpersonal rivalries to maintain competition for patronage. The latest case of abrupt downfall of former Prime Minister Jigme Thinley is a case in point. In the lower echelons of the state apparatus, advancement is controlled by bureaucratic mechanisms, but the palace has maintained its prerogative of filling all high-level posts by royal decree. Such appointments are prized, for in the tradition of the government administration, they open the doors to personal aggrandizement of a sort that might elsewhere be condemned as graft. Palace favorites may be rewarded with control of public enterprises, and public office has facilitated access to such benefits as real estate, import licenses, commercial licenses, and noncompetitive contracts. Even the contractual particulars in the lower echelons are subject to royal family intervention and manipulation, so that the entire corpus of government lies open,
and vulnerable, to the king’s and his family’s pleasure. Commercial enterprises and banks in the private sector are also heavily dominated by the royal family, with the result that policies of privatization progressively implemented since 1990s have not reduced the palace’s control. Indeed, the king’s influence in the private sector has been strengthened through the marriages of royal daughters and sons. The king does not openly flaunt these powers, but in public and private sectors, he and his family remain in a position to make, or break, individual fortunes. Government and commercial perquisites actively cultivate a royal clientele and in turn make powerful patrons of the king’s own clients. The Bhutan political economy turns on such relations, and the close incorporation of political elites into the system reinforces the monarch’s own position. When otherwise faithful clients overstep their bounds, they are removed from office, and only when they have been sufficiently chastised may they be reinstated or reintegrated within the elect circle of power. The king alone has such freedom to maneuver and through it his patriarchal authority and patrimonial control is reinforced. Where patronage cannot fully ensure royal dominion, the king has himself taken charge, directly or indirectly. Highly authoritarian regimes and governments that create façades of royal democracy, while excluding genuine political participation through clientalist patronage systems, are usually poisoned by the effects of corruption. Bhutan often creates corrupt political dynamics whereby those in power provide economic rewards such as money and government contracts, resources such as public sector jobs, social welfare services, permits and concessions, political status such as appointed positions, and a limited number of seats in parliament, including parliamentary immunity in exchange for political acquiescence. Such buyoff scans affects nascent political parties, parliaments, local governments, and CSOs in Bhutan.

Corruption at a high level by the bureaucrats, royalists, and royal family members is rampant and unconcealed in Bhutan, as cogently reinforced by the Audit Commission Report of 1980s headed by Tek Nath Rizal and implications of many high-level officials.216 Land swindles have become customary among ministers and government officials since the 1990s, when the political crisis erupted in Southern Bhutan. All the land of refugees was grabbed by a network of monarchy members of royal families, ministers, officials of the armed forces, bureaucrats, and others in power.217 The ruling elite reaped economic benefits when the country adopted liberal approaches to the economy in the late 1990s. The leftover crumbs were given to the middle class close to power centers. Every Bhutanese was aware of the rampant corruption indulged by the ruling
elite and their ilk. The nepotism, favoritism, and misuse of power were unbridled in the past, and there was no one to question the decision of the ruling elite. Whosoever raised their voices was labeled “Ngolops” (anti-nationals) and invited the severest imprisonment, and thus their voices were muted and suppressed.

With the advent of royal democracy after 2008, the middle class close to power centers has been working vigorously to acquire their stake of the economic pie. The regime has granted slight freedoms to the press as a safety valve to release the democratic pressure. The revelations of corruption in land deals by the ruling elite in the media have earned the people’s disgust. Former Prime Minister Jigme Thinley is seen as a biggest charlatan in the aftermath of the revelations of his family members or his own name figuring in scandal after scandal. The dzongdas and senior officials familiar with development planning buy lands earmarked for economic activity or manipulatively transfer government and refugees’ lands in their name so that they can make huge profits from the sales, once the urban development projects kick off. Former Dzongda Yonton acquiring ten acres of land at Denchi is an unsurpassed example. The government has been rampant toward finding tsa-tong for centuries, and registration of such vacant lands quickly into the thram of elites or the royal families. The most attention-grabbing example is the occupation of refugees’ lands without resolving the political crisis that left over one hundred thousand of the population as refugees, ultimately letting them fade into the diaspora. The people should refer back to old chhagzhag thram of those before the 1960s, which gives enough evidence of how land ownerships were made available prior to the modern technology of land survey that paved ways into new entries in the land record books under the vision of “land reforms” initiated by the third king. The new set of laws pertaining to land registration and ownerships, thus, conducted two different types of land surveys: topography and cadastral. However, the outcome of the land survey that brought about much impact and fuss in the general public finally got frozen for reasons best known to the royal government. The policy diverted gradually toward resettling those so-called landless people in the vacant lands earlier occupied under legal ownership of the Bhutanese refugees, who are labeled as “illegal migrants” and are currently fading into different developed countries under the resettlement scheme. The case in point cited below illustrates how this network is operated in Bhutan today under the mask of so-called royal democracy, the GNH, and the anti-national and refugee crisis.
The more than one hundred pages of findings were forwarded to the office of the attorney general on August 31, 2012, after the Anti-Corruption Commission took almost a year to investigate it. The investigation, which started on September 20, 2011, examined all the Kashos laws, rules, criteria, and procedures on land in general and particularly plot allotment. It also stated that most of the members acquired plots in the names of their spouses and relatives, while people who lost their land for the township development were deprived of land even upon repeated requests to the Dzongdas.

The government then had acquired 81.98 acres of land from seventy-one households of Drepong, Wangling, Ngatshang, and Saling Gewogs for the Kurichhu Hydropower project and the higher secondary school in the 1990s. The investigation revealed that of the ninety-nine plots allotted, sixty-seven plots (14.12 acres) were illegal. Of seventy-five plots, sixty-seven plots were allotted to those who were ineligible for land (commercial, residential, and plots on the other side of the river) in Gyalpozhing township. This land in Gyelpozhing was allotted to powerful and influential people and their relatives, violating royal kashos and national laws. The beneficiaries included members of the royal family, the prime minister, ministers, judges, senior bureaucrats, high officials, and their relatives. In the commercial and residential area in proper Gyelpozhing town, the land was also allotted to a host of influential people directly or to their spouses and other family members.

In the second allotment of commercial plots at Gyelpozhing, none of the influential beneficiaries had a business license at the time, which was a must for all allotments. One beneficiary was the former speaker’s son Kezang Tshultrim. The family members of the influential people were allotted plots in their names, giving the address of the people in power. For instance, the royal family members include queen mothers and their family members: Ashi Tsering Pem Wangchuk and Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuk, Yab Ugen Dorji, and Yab Rinzin Dorji. In a severe case of conflict of interest, both former Minister Leki and Director General Tshering Dorji were allotted plots by the former Speaker Jigme Tshultrim. The then home minister, former Prime Minister Jigmi Y. Thinley, to whom all dzongdhas report, was also given a plot. Similarly, then Finance Minister Yeshey Zimba and a relative of the finance secretary at the time, Minister Wangdi Norbu, were also given plots.

The land allotment to influential people in Gyelpozhing was part of a larger allotment done in two phases. In the first phase in 1999, nineteen commercial
plots were allotted to businesspeople who had valid business licenses. Even in this case, procedures were not followed as the allotment and registration were done by the dzongkhag. The land allotment to influential people was done on June 1, 2001, under the guise of commemorating the June 2 coronation of King Jigme (K4). In this case, both the acquisition and allotment of land were not in keeping with the rules. Across the river, a fifty decimal plot was given to the former Prime Minister Jigmi Y. Thinley, who was then the home minister. A one-acre plot was given to Yeshey Zimba, the then finance minister. A fifty decimal plot was given to the then communication minister, Leki Dorji. These lands were allotted to them at a rate of Nu. 5 per square feet or Nu. 2,178 a decimal. Two members of the extended royal family were also allotted a plot each at the same rate. 225

King Jigme (K4) in a Kasho in 1980–1981 made it clear that all rural allotments of government land can only be done by the throne. A Kasho in 1987 further reiterated that all allotment of land in urban areas were to be done only by the king. Former Prime Minister Jigmi Y. Thinley, in an explanation on Gyalpozhing case, said the Kashos pertained only to government land, tsamdros, and sokshings, and not to urban plots that were and are always allotted by empowered authorities or dzongkhag committees. “If the Gyalpozhing land allotment is to be declared illegal, then all the townships in the country will become illegal, since all building plots were allotted by urban development and dzongkhag authorities from the beginning.” 226

The Plots Allotment Committee undermined the rule of law and the principle of due diligence, fairness, equity, transparency, and check and balance. Besides the legality of how land in Gyalpozhing was transacted to several influential people, it also brings up issues of ethical and moral standards and leadership accountability, particularly so when some of those involved was holding the key of power. The case of Gyalpozhing is not an isolated case—some call it the “tip of the iceberg,” perhaps the weakest link in the chain that somehow snapped. The media and the Anti-Corruption Commission’s investigation into the Gyalpozhing land case is therefore a crucial breakthrough in revealing the malfeasance of those in power in the past and the present. 227

The judicial system is so weak that all the people found guilty of wrongdoing are absolved from crime by just paying “monetary payment in lieu of prison term against the district court’s ruling of one year prison term.” Dechen notes that:

between January 10 and 17 this year, all the [thirteen] former Gyalpozhing land allotment committee members paid thrimthue (monetary payment in lieu of prison term) against the district court’s ruling of
one year prison term. Calculated at Nu 100 a day, each committee member had to pay Nu 36,000. The former National Assembly Speaker and the former home minister who were the members of the land allotment committee also paid thrimthue to the high court last year. The former Speaker paid Nu 90,000 in lieu of a two-and-a-half-year prison term, while the former home minister paid Nu 36,000 for the a year-long prison term.228

This case resiliently supports the perception of Gray and Kaufmann, who note that “where there is systemic corruption, the institution, values, and norms of behavior have already been adapted to the corruption modus operandi with bureaucrats and other agents follow the predatory examples of, or even taking instruction from, them in the political arena.”229 The attorney general office and court, which deliver the verdict, is under the same species: king and the network of the monarchy. The only difference is a state of affairs between King Jigme (K4), King Keshar (K5), royal family members, and elected government. This also reveals the rat race competitions between royal members and network to acquire wealth and resources. The above is just one illustration of how the network of client-patron relationship operates in Bhutan. Some other examples of land scams and corruptions in Bhutan are briefly highlighted below.

Nganglam Allegations
The Anti-Corruption Commission is investigating the conversion of government land into private property, irregular land compensation, and inconsistencies in land holdings in Rinchenthang, where more than four hundred acres have been identified to establish a town in Nganglam. There are numerous other allegations of manipulation of land records, bribery, illegal transfer of land ownership from rural status to a nearby township, and a reduction in the size of land owned by the poorer sections of society.230

Denchi Land Reparation Scam
The government acquired 116 acres of rural land at Denchi for the development of a town at Pemagatshal, six kilometers from the existing Dzong. The cabinet under former Prime Minister Jigme Thinley provided high compensation rates to landowners with the biggest beneficiary being the prime minister’s aunt, Aum Dechen, and former Pemagatshel Dzongda Yonten. The government land compensation rules and regulations had set the compensation rate at Nu. 3,952.42 per decimal. However, the cabinet directive increased this to Nu. 9,000. Aum Dechen has received Nu. 21.60 million instead of Nu. 9.48 million. Former Prime Minister Jigme Thinley defended his decision by saying that increase in the rate was provided as a “kidu” for losing their land. Why is this “kidu”
selectively practiced? New documents and evidences show that despite the government’s clarifications, the Denchi land compensation was an illegal act by the cabinet with a strong conflict of interest. The government went against the official recommendations, which was already aware of Denchi being declared a Thromde, didn’t follow the rules applied in Denchi in another new urban town Duksum in Trashiyangtse, where rural rates were paid, and also misinterpreted and violated the rules and the Land Act of 2007.

Civil Service Trainings Grabbed by a Privileged Few

A Royal Audit Authority performance audit of civil servants training confirms that many civil servants are trained in the wrong fields, non-eligible civil servants are sent for trainings and education abroad, and time gaps between trainings are not maintained. This means that privileged sycophants close to ruling elites have stolen the foreign training and higher education opportunities meant for genuine candidates. This practice has been rampant since the 1980s in Bhutan.²³¹

Millions Defrauded by Health Ministry Officials

A plastic bucket worth Nu. 600 was bought for Nu. 7,500. Rot has spread across most departments in the health ministry with faulty tendering, favoritism, purchasing of poor quality equipment, excessive ordering, overpricing, and collusion. For example, the Ministry of Health paid Nu. 1.3 million for a treadmill that could have been obtained for Nu. 97,000. An Anti-Corruption Commission review on the procurement of medical equipment has shown institutionalized corruption in the Ministry of Health, where officials at various levels were bribed. For over a decade, suppliers, along with local officials, have been cheating the country of millions with scant regard for the welfare of patients. From 2005 to 2010, the procurement budget was Nu. 1.231 billion worth of medicines and equipment, with equipment taking up around 60 percent of the pie.²³² The Ministry of Health is the tip of the iceberg of corruption, and this proclivity is prevalent in almost all ministries, including Bhutan’s foreign missions based abroad.²³³

Mismanagement, Irregularities, and Alleged Corrupt Practices in Bhutan Development Finance Corporation Ltd.

An audit report points out irregularities in Bhutan Development Finance Corporation Ltd.’s loan giving practices, construction of the head office, and
hiring of personnel, and refers some cases to the Anti-Corruption Commission.  

**Bhutan Post Corporation Limited Violating the Procurement Rules and Regulations**

The Bhutan Post Corporation Limited’s tender for the procurement of fifteen city buses has been awarded to Global Traders and Gangjung, a company owned by former Prime Minister Jigme Thinley’s son-in-law, violating the procurement rules and regulations.

**The Land Affair of Trowa Theatre in Thimphu City**

In another instance of nepotism and abuse of power by former Prime Minister Jigme Thinley, the land affair of Trowa Theatre in Thimphu City, whose owner happens to be his son-in-law’s father, Kunley Wangchuck, is in the spotlight. He is also the father-in-law to Princess Chime Yangzom Wangchuck. Over six years, the owner had been operating the theater without paying a penny as rent to the government for 19,500 square feet of land. Instead, the government was prepared to sell the land to Kunley Wangchuk, despite his having not paid rent to the government for over six years, until the National Council intervened and ordered an inquiry. Former Prime Minister Jigme Thinley defended this by saying, “this is all to harm and defame me and the government, had it been another person, the media would have supported the person, who owned Trowa Theatre.”

The latest is the corruption case of present Foreign Minister Rinzin. He is charged with misusing public properties including government vehicles to transport his private timber from Haa to Thimphu for construction of his house. He is also being charged with giving tenders for construction of Lhakhang without following the due process of government tendering while he was a district administrator of Haa district. Kuensel notes: “Foreign minister Rinzin Dorje, who was then the Haa dzongda, is charged on two counts of abuse of functions. Lyonpo Rinzin Dorje is charged with favouring LD Sawmill by awarding timber sawing works worth Nu 1.403M without approval of the tender committee. He is also charged with using the dzongkhag’s DCM truck to transport his private timber from Haa to Thimphu.” Presently, he is under authorized absence, and the case is ongoing.

The land scams and corruptions discovered so far are only the tip of the iceberg. However, the trend and pattern is a disconcerting one to all Bhutanese. The land scams have revealed so far a dangerous nexus of royal family
members, senior government leaders, influential people, bureaucrats, judges, land officials, and local government leaders. These powerful few have been getting together with a level of coordination and cooperation that would put the concept of division of powers in a state to shame. The land scams and corruption are simply not scams but are symptoms of a larger problem of royal governance and show that a powerful few assume that they can get away with anything. The blatant and deliberate abuse of power at various levels, many in defiance of royal Kashos, shows the seriousness of this problem. The leaders express that they should have say over land Kidu to individuals. First of all, this notion goes against the royal constitution as only the king can grant land Kidu under the constitution. The scams are also a complete antithesis of the principles of the royal GNH, as the four pillars of GNH have been violated. The orderliness is sabotaged and laws are breached, development becomes distorted, environment and ecosystems are ruined, and culture is impinged upon as corruption and abuse of power become an acknowledged model in Bhutanese society. In the mid-1980s, a special committee on land found several irregularities over land cases across the country involving land officials, influential people, and judges. Two decades later, the high-level committee report of 2003 covering only Thimphu found similar practices involving a similar set of dispositions. This was despite numerous Kasho from King Jigme (K4) and the 1979 Land Act to defer to the laws of the country on land allotment.

There are so many sources through which Bhutanese citizens could comprehend the fact about unreported massive corruption prevailing in Bhutan under royal democracy. No matter that the whole of Southern Bhutan refugees’ land was grabbed illegally by the same group of people with the government letting them do so; the gyelposhing land grab case is a point at which to start. All cases have to be investigated. This is one classic example of how these royalists have seized all resources of Bhutan. This also explains why these hardcore conservative elites are reluctant to resolve refugee issues as this will open the can of worms on land scams and human rights violations in Southern and Eastern Bhutan since the 1990s. This also elucidates whether the royal family is hand-in-glove with these groups, or if the king is losing his control and authority over his own network as revealed by the fact that his land kashos have been ignored repeatedly by his own government, cronies, and family members. This also highlights why Tek Nath Rizal became the victim of situation, when he exactly pointed the indistinguishable category of corruption involving former Home Minister Dago Tsering and his group. It is ironic to note that instead of
remedial measures, this birthed the crisis in Southern Bhutan. The Dago and his
groups had a vendetta against Rizal for his corruption findings and actions
recommended to clean the corrupt system in the 1980s. This kind of troubling
revelation, in a country with a king leadership, should serve as a base for
apprehending the culprits with a view to bringing them to justice. On the
contrary, however, the culprits are presently dynamic “power brokers” in
Bhutan’s politics, seeking democratic avenues to perpetuate their rule and
corruption. The Bhutan Today notes: “From the above scandals, it is clear that
Prime Minister is blatantly abusing his powers and is practicing nepotism. He
has willfully violated the oath of secrecy, and the oath of affirmation of office
under the Constitution. It is apparent that he has granted undue favor. . . . Jigme
Thinley is where he is, as he has long been a close confidant of the institution of
monarchy.” Former Prime Minister Jigme Thinley isn’t an exception. King
Keshar’s (K5) reign promised to have zero tolerance against corruption.
Therefore, the onus lies with King Keshar (K5) whether to let the tainted leaders
continue to occupy the highest decision-making posts of the state. After all, the
lever of power continues to rest with the monarchy. It has exhibited a nascent
model of patronage politics and crony capitalism in the country.

Now the question is why is corruption so pervasive in Bhutan? The type of
corruption in Bhutan would circumvent even royal democracy, distorting
economic growth and perpetuating disillusionment in society. Bhutan is failing
to reverse the effects of corruption because of a combination of weak
government institutions and a lack of public support. These weaknesses are
rooted in the legacies of Bhutanese system. Bhutanese society is alienated from
the government, both institutionally and psychologically, and therefore it is
unable to exercise oversight over its activities. The elites are extremely
powerful. High levels of impunity and de facto property rights suggest that since
the 1990s, officials had “the means, the motive, and the opportunity” to turn
state assets and private assets of refugees into personal gains. All of these
features demonstrate that corruption in Bhutan is rooted in the weaknesses of the
Bhutanese system. Politically, Bhutan’s transition from an authoritarian state
was not accompanied by extensive legislative and institutional reforms. After
2008, no new institutions were built; patronage continues to be provided to an
old, largely corrupt Bhutanese system and consequently, corruption remains
state-centric. Thus, the corruption in Bhutan is rooted in poor distinctions
between the public and private spheres, weak official institutions, inadequate
regulatory systems, low levels of economic competition, and a weak civil
Many of these features can be identified in other countries suffering from similar problems of systemic corruption, particularly in South Asia.

Bhutan today is under the grip of what Osaghae referred to as the “corruption-soaked elites and government,” or what is called “spoilization of the system.” Thus, we find both “informal spoilization of the state” and the state-centric corruption in Bhutan, as conversed above, in the name of royal democracy. The lingering wave of corruption and scams has strained the ethical disposition of the state and has come to tenaciously spoil the entire sociopolitical and economic fabric of the state.

CONCLUSION

“Electoral authoritarianism” has become the modal form of non-democracy during the late twentieth century. It is widely argued that the post–Cold War international environment created many domestic and foreign pressures to democratize. Autocrats chose to hold multiparty elections to acquiesce to these while still maintaining their grasp on power. According to conventional wisdom, therefore, autocrats were compelled to concede political liberalization. The prevalence of electoral authoritarianism in Bhutan since the end of the Cold War gives the impression to support this justification.

The use of the scare quotes around the word “democracy” in Joseph’s Bhutan: Democracy from Above signifies that “there is a falsity to it, something undemocratic about the experiment with democracy.” Adopting a wholly cynical view of the transition, Joseph says that it is an attempt “by the Bhutanese ruling elite to hoodwink the international community . . . to deviate the attention of the international community from the resolution of the refugee problem and to accommodate the emerging political dissent in Bhutan.”

Uprooting established patterns of political interactions and redirecting social energies is a daunting and intimidating task in Bhutan. Inevitably, the attention of actors and observers alike is directed to formal structures—constitutions, parliaments, courts, and electoral systems. Formally articulated structures represent only the tip of the iceberg of politics, however, and they are difficult enough to change even with an expressed popular mandate. Informal patterns anchored in a society’s political culture present an even greater challenge, insofar as their foundation and perpetuation are rarely examined by those enmeshed in them. The invisibility of patterns to those who operate within a culture—and even more so, the invisibility of their roots—leaves those patterns
resistant to change. Structural forces work on culture as wind and water work on stone, but continuity is the lawful expectation of culture. In Bhutan, social and political structures that might assist in the birthing of democratic rule are themselves weak or compromised. Ruling parties cling fiercely to power; opposition parties are fragmented and weak. With few exceptions, the industrial bourgeoisie has no base independent of government. There is little history of political pluralism. As opposed to the constitutional monarchies in the West, the monarchy in Bhutan established a political system based on authoritarianism and the subordination to it of all other political institutions, whether legislative, executive, or judicial.

The conclusion to be drawn here is that despite the impressive royal display of democratic-looking institutions, a parliament, and two-party electoral competitions, no significant power has devolved outside the regime. In other terminology, true democratization cannot exist without constitutional limitations on the king’s power. Clearly, the heart of the matter, and the real test of constitutional reform, will be whether and how the powers and prerogatives of the monarchy are, for the first time, precisely and carefully delimited. This includes not only the powers of the monarch relative to the different branches of government, but also a wide range of traditionally extralegal, patrimonial prerogatives, such as the power to issue royal decrees and kidus, which should be delimited within a constitutional framework. Authoritarianism is not an office but a system embedded in a widely dispersed network of institutions and practices. Although no real reform would advance without resolving this question of monarchical privilege, the kind of political change that people are now seeking goes beyond the fate of any single institution. Until now, the Bhutanese have tolerated state-controlled elections that are, in fact, structurally rigged, through gerrymandering, the complexity of the electoral code, and the tacit agreement of parties, to prevent an inconvenient majority.

Democracy is a process, not a result, and it would be naive to think that a statute, a referendum, or a demonstration could make it happen. Indeed, beyond any set of legal or institutional changes, there is the more fundamental question of political culture. It requires not just elections, but engagement—the ongoing participation of citizens in all the difficult decisions required to remake their society and their lives. However, the legacy of decades of authoritarianism includes passivity, resignation, fear, and cynicism. It includes a political framework in which parties become part of a spoils system, habituated to their dependence on the monarchy, and reluctant to embrace a reform that would cut
those ties. These implicit but powerful elements of authoritarianism provide the most stubborn obstacles to a thoroughgoing, self-sustaining process of democratization in Bhutan. Bhutanese reforms remain a shadow game: democratic institutions have little substantive authority, and citizens’ preferences, as expressed at the ballot box, rarely have much effect on government policy. In this sense, Bhutan remains a government of the king’s sovereign voice rather than a government of people. Bhutan is a monarchy, and all the complexities and contradictions that color relations between its ruled and ruler are embedded in that simple assertion. Although political parties mediate competition among elites and a constitution ostensibly defines the parameters of legitimate political play, Bhutan today remains in the tutelage of patrimonial principles. The king towers over the political system. The king defines the players and the play; he sets the tone of political discourse. Any analysis of Bhutan state–society relations must thus commence with the monarchy. The Bhutan monarchy appears to many an idealistic political anachronism. Through the life of royal constitution, parties and the palace would struggle over control of the political process, although as outlined above, the early contests clearly gave the upper hand to the monarchy and royalists. Thus, political reforms since the 2000s are nothing but “Jigmecracy, an old wine in new bottle” to suit the changing global and regional order much more analogous resembling Middle Eastern monarchies. The politics behind the shadow game of Bhutanese reform form the basis of discourse in the next chapter.

NOTES

2. I use the terminology “Jigmecracy” to refer to royal semi-authoritarianism democracy introduced by King Jigme Singye Wangchuk.


14. Ceremonial scarf conferred to an appointee or elective to an office.

15. A huge thongdrel of Zhabdrung Rinpoche sponsored and commissioned by the late Je Khenpo, His Holiness Geshe Gedun Rinchen, had been put on display.


24. Ibid, 327.


Framework and Royal Initiatives for Democracy in Jordan.


32. See N. Blain and H. O’Donnell, Media, Monarchy and Power (Bristol: Intellect, 2003), 93.


41. This is a statement made by former Chief Justice of Bhutan Sonam Tobgye on July 18, 2008.


43. Refer to P. Heywood, Values and Political Change in Post Communist Europe (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 343.


47. For details, see P. Heywood, Values and Political Change in Post Communist Europe (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 342.


54. See S. Kinga, *Polity, Kingship and Democracy: A Biography of the Bhutanese State* (Thimphu: Ministry of Education, 2009), 354–55. For proof-positive Kinga, note that: “As much as the Constitution has its legitimacy endowed by popular participation in the drafting process, debate in the Parliament by elected representatives and their adoption by signing it, legitimacy has also been derived from divine blessings. The blessings came from tutelary deities in the goenkhang, the prayer ceremonies conducted, huge thangkas hung for public viewing and worship on the inner walls of Tashichho Dzong, and signing of the Constitution in front of Buddha Shaky Muni and that of Kutshab Tenga and Zhabdrung Khamsum Zilnon. Through this process and ceremonies of invoking divine blessings, the Constitution has become a sacred document, not a secular manuscript. In fact, one copy of the Constitution is done in the form of a scripture. More than anything else, its non-secular character derives from the fact that His Majesty the King had signed it. As King, he turns the wheel of two traditions, the secular and spiritual or chhoesid lugnyi.”


70. Look up the Constitution of Bhutan, Section 8 of Article 1, Section 2 of Article 7, and Section 4 of Article 7. [www.bhutanaudit.gov.bt/.../Constitution%20of%20Bhutan%202008.pdf](http://www.bhutanaudit.gov.bt/.../Constitution%20of%20Bhutan%202008.pdf).

81. The National Assembly of Bhutan on December 7, 2010, endorsed the amendment in the Election Act, which allow state funding for the two existing parties in Bhutan.
82. For particulars, see “Bhutan Uncertain on Democracy: PM” Thimphu, Bhutan, August 24, 2011, Agence France Presse.
83. Consult Status of Democratization in the Kingdom of Bhutan: Briefing by the Chief Election Commissioner of Bhutan to the Eleventh Round Table Meeting, Thimphu, Bhutan, 2011.
86. Refer to F. de Varennes, “Constitutionalising Discrimination in Bhutan: The Emasculation of Human Rights in the Land of the Dragon Kingdom,” Asia-Pacific Journal on Human Rights and the Law, 2 (2008): 47–76. For instance, de Varennes elaborated that, “It not only limits the political scene in Bhutan to a maximum of two parties: one forming the government, and one in opposition essentially, it prevents any of these political parties from taking up the cause of particular minorities since its membership cannot be based on region, sex, language, religion or social origin. It must be broad based ‘with cross-national membership and support and is committed to national cohesion and stability,’ and it cannot ‘receive money or any assistance from foreign sources, be it governmental, non-governmental, private organizations or from private parties or individuals.’ This imposes a significant restriction on the freedom of association, which goes against the international law. In practice, it also may mean minorities are unable to effectively participate in the political affairs of the state, since their voices and concerns run the risk that they will simply always be out-voted and therefore marginalized by the majority.”


126. The second parliamentary elections were successfully held in 2013. The election to the National Council was held on April 23, 2013. The voter turnout was 45.16 percent with 171,544 voters voting, out of the total registered voters of 379,819. Sixty-seven candidates stood for elections to twenty seats. No women were elected, though six had registered. Of the five eminent members nominated by the king, two were women. For the National Assembly seats, the primary round was held on May 31, 2013. From the four registered political parties, Druk Phuensum Tshogpa and the People’s Democratic Party went through to the general round having secured the highest and second highest votes, respectively. The voter turnout was 55.27 percent with 211,018 casting their votes from the total registered voters of 381,790. The general round for the National Assembly elections was held on July 13, 2013. The People’s Democratic Party secured thirty-two National Assembly seats and Druk Phuensum Tshogpa fifteen seats. The overall voter turnout was 66.1 percent with 252,485 voters casting their votes out of a total of 381,790 registered voters.


128. Refer to chapter 7 of this book for Bhutan-China relations and role of Jigme Thinley.

129. The Government of India on July 1, 2013, had withdrawn four subsidies for liquid petroleum gas, kerosene oil, Chukha power tariffs, and the excise duty refund. The average cost of a cylinder of gas went up from Nu. 489 to Nu. 1156. The cost of kerosene oil rose from Nu. 15 to Nu. 55. Bhutan lost Indian rupees of 910 million annually from the Chukha power tariff subsidy withdrawal and a loss of three billion from the withdrawal of subsidy on excise duty refund. These withdrawals have had a huge impact on Bhutan’s balance of payment. And the withdrawal came on the eve of the second general election.

130. For details, refer to S. Wangchuk, “DPT’s 15-point submission to His Majesty,” July 20, 2013. [http://www.kuenselonline.com](http://www.kuenselonline.com). It has been reported that of the fifteen issues drawn up during the two-day party meeting in Thimphu, the most important one relates to politicization, or involvement of officials within His Majesty’s secretariat and the timing of their granting of kidus, in terms of census and land to people. The People’s Democratic Party (PDP) claimed to be a party of the king, and the fact that some of its candidates claimed to have joined the party following the king’s command was also among the issues. Allegations of the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industries president telling people that the PDP was established to protect the institution was also reflected in the list. The PDP’s pledges to give people census,
land, and luring armed forces, which were royal prerogatives, was another issue that was included for submission to the king. With regard to the secret ballots, it was decided at the convention that the issue of disallowing representatives, or party-appointed observers at the closing of electronic voting machines at numerous polling stations across the country was also to be included. They also incorporated complaints of postal ballots that were sent on behalf of students, spouses, and family members of the armed forces. Involvement of military officials, especially in relation to postal ballots, their use of coercion, forgery, and involvement of retired military officials in the electoral process was also an issue for submission as was the involvement of local government officials in persuading voters by campaigning openly and calling meetings. The members and supporters also listed involvement of interim government advisor like Karma Ura, a civil servant, who was supposed to remain apolitical and facilitate free and fair elections. Dragging in the country’s foreign policy, particularly that of Indo-Bhutan relations, and how the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa government strained it was another issue that was submitted to the king. About twenty people, a mix of five elected candidates, five elderly men, five women, and five youth, were chosen to take the petition to the king.


134. See J. Waterbury, Fortuitous by Products: In Transitions to Democracy in Latin America (New York: Columbia University, 1999), 261.


139. For details on corruptions and land scams, see the section “Surfing the Corruptions and Land Scams in the Monarchical Democracy” of this chapter.


150. For benefits and perks of members of parliament, see different issues of Kuensel from May to August, 2014. [http://www.kuenselonline.com/](http://www.kuenselonline.com/).


159. Refer to K. Dema, “Obligations Hold Back Budding Politicians,” October 20, 2012. [http://www.kuenselonline.com/2011](http://www.kuenselonline.com/2011). About 57 percent of the civil servants are in the Dzongkhag administration and Thromdes and the rest with the central agencies. Two percent of the civil servants (559) were expatriates. On an average, civil service has been growing at the rate of 4 percent per annum over the last five years, and pay and allowance to civil servants constitutes about 45 percent of the total recurrent expenditure.


165. Kuensel and Bhutan Broadcasting Service were established in the mid-1980s as the first Bhutanese newspaper and radio station. With the introduction of information and communication technology in the late 1990s, the Bhutanese media has grown considerably in all its forms—print, broadcast, film, music, and the Internet. Today, there are twelve newspapers, six radio stations, two television news channels, and one entertainment channel.
166. Consult K. Wangmo, “Has Journalism Lost Its Mojo?” August 23, 2014. http://www.kuenselonline.com/2014. The situation assessment of journalists’ reports researched and compiled by the Journalists Association of Bhutan. For the study, ninety journalists working in sixteen media organizations and twenty-nine former journalists were interviewed or involved in focus group discussions.


173. Ibid.

174. Ibid.


182. Refer to S. M. Patrick, The UN Happiness Summit, April 2012.


186. For example, The Working Group on Minorities in 2005 received a nerve-racking report alleging that the Lhotsampa minority community had been most affected by the policies of assimilation, exclusion, and eviction, and that those policies had resulted in the expulsion of one-sixth of Bhutan’s population.


192. See S. Kinga, Polity, Kingship and Democracy: A Biography of the Bhutanese State (Thimphu:
193. Consult International Religious Freedom Report May 20, 2013. It has noted that according to unconfirmed estimates, there are between three thousand and fifteen thousand Christians in the country.
198. A. André, on 28 October, 2013, documented the plight of Vivek (name changed), who had no access to any government job. His children had no access to higher education, and the whole family needed a special road permit to travel through the country. He was denied a loan and lost the right to his family’s land and property in South Bhutan. Such cases underscore the arbitrary nature of the granting of citizenship in Bhutan. The Vivek case is just the tip of the iceberg. There are countless illustrations like those of like Vivek under a royal democracy, who are stateless.
199. See O. Pradhan, _Bhutan: The Roar of the Thunder Dragon_ (Thimphu: Kmedia, 2012), 157–59. The book has been written on the advice and guidance of King Jigme to cover up the atrocities committed in the 1990s and scapegoats some officials to set the king’s record straight. It speaks of how unscrupulous and unprofessional were those people employed by the home ministry for carrying out the census in the South. The book, dedicated to His Majesty the King, in itself boomerangs to the Article 6:2 of the Constitution of Bhutan. Article 6 states that “a person, domiciled in Bhutan on or before the Thirty-First of December Nineteen Hundred and Fifty Eight and whose name is registered in the official record of the Government of Bhutan shall be a citizen of Bhutan by registration.”
200. Kuensel issue dated November 13, 2013, reports on the granting of citizenship. In the last seven years, His Majesty the King granted citizenship kidu to a total of 8,577 people in the country, Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay said at the press conference, which was held on completion of the government’s first one hundred days in office. Out the 8,577, a total of 4,000 people received citizenship kidu within the last three months.
207. For more particulars, see http://www.csoa.org.bt.


216. For details, refer to T. N. Rizal, From Palace to Prison (Kathmandu: Oxford International Publication, 2009).

217. For instance, Chachap Rinchin Dorji, the Tsirang Thrimpon (district judge), authorized the sale of seized property of refugees in Southern Bhutan at an underpriced value of Nu. 4000 per acre on the order of higher authorities from Thimphu. Subsequently, various senior officials from within the same circle purchased properties. When the people of Tsirang complained about the price, the incident was exposed and it became increasingly embarrassing to hide it. The Thrimpon was blamed for authorizing the sale and charged with misappropriating the authority of office, and his services was terminated.

218. Lands previously occupied and fallen vacant over the years.


222. Royal edict.


224. They include Pema Choden care of former Chief Justice Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye, Pema Choden care of Royal Secretary Pema Wangchen, and Chencho Tshering care of former Ministry of Works and Human Settlement Secretary Tshering Dorjee. Similarly, in the allotment of residential land, it was given in the name of spouses and relatives of influential people. These are Sonam Norbu care of former Minister Wangdi Norbu the then Finance Secretary Ugyen Jamyang, care of Dr. Jigme Singye, Sonam Tobgye care of Colonel Kado, Tshering Pelzom care of Mongar Drangpon, Jangchub Dema care of Lhuentse Drangpon, Dawa Zangmo care of Dr Nawang of Mongar Hospital, Sonam Lhaden care of Dzongda Karma, who is the director of the Department of National Properties, and Dasho Tsheten of Lhuentse. The beneficiaries from the Kurichu project were Sonam Yangchen care of the managing director of the Kurichu project and Chimi Dema care of Namgay also from the project.

225. For more information, consult the one hundred-page findings of the Anti-Corruption Commission from August 31, 2012, forwarded to the office of the attorney general.


227. Consult Business Bhutan, “Gyalpozhing Case: A Saga of Corruption?” September 8, 2012; also refer to M. D. Tshering, “Gyalpozhing’s 70 Land Restitution Cases.” http://www.kuenselonline.com/2012. Anti-corruption officials said land allotted to seventy recipients were illegal and that they received the land through the dzongdas in the late 1990s through false statements. Besides, the recipients also did not fulfill the criteria. Therefore, the allotted plots, anti-corruption officials said, needed to be cancelled and restituted to the state in accordance with section 48 of the Penal Code of Bhutan. The commission officials said it was against the 1987 Kaja. The 1991 government circular, received through the then zonal administrator also prohibited allotment of plots to people failing to fulfill government-approved criteria. The criteria said commercial plots would be allotted first to people conducting business in the area and second to local residents before it was opened for others from different parts of the country to purchase. The Ministry of Works and Human Settlement’s circular of 1991 also prescribed the same. Mongar drangpon said the Anti-Corruption Commission only wished to cancel the allotment of plots and have it restituted to the state.


233. For details, refer to Anti-Corruption Commission and Audit Reports from 1990 to 2012.


Chapter Five
The Politics behind the Curtain of Royal Democracy

Democracy, a rule by the people, is an extraordinary idea, a truly inspiring and pioneering ideal in the history of human interactions. It connotes that power should be vested in the people, not a hierarchy, not a king, not the elite, but the people. However, the reality is often ugly, cynical, and manipulative, as seen in Bhutan today. Bhutan today represents an indistinct political system that combines the rhetorical acquiescence of democracy with illiberal authoritarian traits and unabated tyranny of the former royalist and monarchist under royal shadow. This chapter is dovetailed to contemplate the king’s unquestionable politics behind the curtain of semi-authoritarianism democracy.

THE SMOKE SCREEN OF ROYAL DEMOCRACY

Democracy has come a long way from the Greek ideas of Demos and Kratos, and in fact this journey in the tiny Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan since 2008 seems to be one of a regime-initiated one. It embraces all the trappings of being depicted as another model of semi-authoritarian democracy, where democracy is and was looked upon as an institution under the protection of authoritarian regime. In Bhutan, the custodian appears to be the monarchy and the kings themselves as conversed in previous chapter. Instead of political equality and popular empowerment, democracy became game dominated by the power of kings, elites, and dominant classes. Rule by the people becomes largely a symbolic sideshow, while the real exercise of political power occurs behind the scenes, as tenaciously demonstrated by Bhutan today.

In his book, The Social Contract, Rousseau said that liberty and justice could only exist in a democracy that was ruled by the “will of the people.” He held that the “will of the people” would always be right and that to obey this government was to realize freedom. When King Keshar (K5) succeeded his father in 2006, he knew of the people’s high expectations. He made several gestures to enlighten the beginning of a benevolent, soothing era. In every official tour of
rural Bhutan, he embraced students, poor, youths, the elderly, and the handicapped. Nevertheless, these gesticulations remain largely symbolic today. After close to nine years on the throne, the king has effected no systemic political change. Notwithstanding his genuine modesty and concern for the poor and powerless, the king has announced no discernible program of political reforms, repatriation of the refugees, and reconciliation with opposition in exile. His initiatives seem to be indiscreet, rather than guided by a clear reformist strategy. He bypasses due process and formal decision-making institutions, diluting his professed, aim to establish the rule of law. The king’s personal initiatives reproduce, in a different form, the old image of King Jigme (K4). The medieval mechanisms of exercising political authority in Bhutan are still in place.

Democracy believers in exile and even some inside Bhutan are raising questions about the prospects for serious and considerable political reform without systemic changes. Average Bhutanese speculate that if the feudal system can be eliminated as long as King Jigme’s (K4) camouflage of the old guard of ministers, bureaucrats, royal family members, advisers, dignitaries, and military generals, who became so powerful under his reign, sit at King Keshar’s (K5) side. However, neither the pro-democracy political parties in exile, completely alienated from the people, nor the royalist parties, who have no credible democratization plans, have the capacity to challenge the authoritarian system.

Bhutan’s political crisis transcends the problems usually associated with processes of liberalization. In transitional polities, liberalization and democratization are commonly a matter of making a secular authority more accountable to its citizens. Bhutan’s crisis, however, reflects the ambiguous foundations of formal political authority itself. Change in Bhutan should come as a powerful storm. Change should strip away false feudal and traditional images and put Bhutanese people, institutions, and political parties to severe tests. It should expose the reality of society, which is often hidden in feudal shell in contemporary times. Today, Bhutan is divided between the “enlightened middle-classes, who understand democracy” and the “politically ignorant rural Bhutanese.” However, the irony is that it is the poor who seem to be more committed to royal democracy while the so-called elite and educated middle class are determined to hang onto their privileges by any mode possible. It is incongruous to note that the potentially destructive “patron-client system” in Bhutan is constantly created and re-created by the Bhutan elites.
King Jigme’s (K4) so-called enlightened despotic rule has left a legacy that inhibits change. The most important institutions and ideological component of Jigme’s legacy is the “one nation, one people policy” insulated under the rubric of the Gross National Happiness “GNH” and Tsa-Wa-Sum. The system provided the administrative structure, legal framework and security apparatus to extend the king’s authority over the Bhutanese people.

The authoritarian detachment from the past is as important as the democratic commitment in sustaining the legitimacy of a democratic regime. However, this is not the case of Bhutan as it has not separated itself from the past feudal system nor there is a real change in leadership. King Jigme (K4) ruled from behind the scenes, and he is the real power wielder. The same previous system and elites with many more repressive laws and bylaws are in existence with the same old leaders loyal to the monarch. “Politically relevant elites” are the pillars of the political process and therefore a crucial element to look at when studying regime change.¹

Politically relevant elites in the Bhutan predominantly consist of those who were most closely and personally affiliated to the regime leadership. Until today, loyalty is the most indispensable quality needed in order to accede to the politically relevant elites, and political competence played a secondary role in Bhutan. Elites remained in a much closed circle and access was strictly controlled by the leaders close to the king and royal family.

The monarchy’s strategy of using modern institutions to preserve medieval political authority required tactics of repression and cooptation. With his close allies and collaborators, the king distributed high administrative and government positions, and immense state-subsidized benefits and services. The king used cooptation to buy out influences and reward supporters within the political elite. The two-party electoral system in Bhutan operated essentially as a mechanism to select, control, and reproduce docile and dependent political elite. While the king’s despotism succeeded in manufacturing an international image of “enlightened moderation, competitive pluralism and relative political stability,” its social consequences were severe. Authoritarian elites determine who may or may not participate in the formal political system. The political power is centered in the palace. The king controls the distribution of resources and determines the political rules. He decides who may formally participate in politics and sets the boundaries within which they may do so. The monarch is not alone in creating rules governing political participation; indeed, all incumbent elites manipulate their environments. Siegfried states:
Despite the incorporation of more actors in the country’s decision making process, politics in Bhutan remain an exclusive business run by the elite, which got expanded with some new stakeholders. In brief, pro-forma or not, the decision to delegate its executive power could also be interpreted as a part of a divide and rule strategy of the king in order to save as much as possible of the new status quo for his heirs.²

Most important in this context is who will control the armed forces, the king or the elected parliament? And who owns the country’s most lucrative businesses? In other words: who has the power of the purse? If both remain under the king’s authority, democracy is not consolidated. In order to avoid this, the decision-making processes should be made more transparent and fully owned by the lawmakers rather than by elitist groups, who greatly influence decision-making procedures in consultation with the king. Only a strong parliament, legitimated by a high voter turnout, can prevent the country from informal domains for extraconstitutional influence. If not, royal democracy in Bhutan will only remain a paper tiger.

In an effort to evoke a democratic buzz in the country, there was a remarkable drop of 8 percent in the voting turnout in 2013 compared to 2008. I contend that this is partly due to the “silent emergence” of social, economic, and political rifts among the Bhutanese. These grievances are reflected in the growing polarization of the society in the country. It is stressed here that the appearance of polarization is due to growing disparities based on an increasingly distorted access to economic and political recourses post royal democracy. This phenomenon finds its expression in a slowly emerging rift between the small new urban and educated middle class vis-à-vis the rural population, which constitutes the bulk of the Bhutanese people. To understand this, one should keep in mind that politics in Bhutan remain an exclusive and, as already conserved in chapter 4, elite-driven process.

However, unlike some authors note in a romanticized depiction of the country’s political system, Bhutan’s political elite does not comprise merely the king, royal family members, and his closest advisors. Rather, elusive politics are characterized by an informal but persistent mutually influencing interaction between the royal family and the newly emerged educated elite class. This small but growing middle class consists of bureaucrats and an increasingly vocal group of economic entrepreneurs in the country’s few urbanizing centers. Because of their political and economic interests, Bhutan’s elites and educated middle class may be instrumental in supporting the monarchy for the ongoing liberalization process. This indicates that the liberalization process was ordered by the king and supported by this elite middle class, which is guided by its own interests.
On a more cynical note, it seems that the liberalization process from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy not only emerged from an act of altruism but also from a line of thought driven by real politick. It was obviously based on a clear assessment of potential trajectories for the monarchy’s viability. Several trends and phenomena internally and externally point toward a rather pessimistic future for an absolute monarchy in the country. Thus, the king had exploited prevailing situation in order to maintain at least a minimum of monarchical elements in Bhutan’s future political system in order to guarantee the survival of the Wangchuck dynasty. Also the demonstration effects of demise of the institution of the Nepalese monarchy and consigning it into the dustbin of history have played an affirmative role for introducing reforms in Bhutan. Sreeram pointed out that:

The interesting question is whether the “demonstration effects” of Nepal was felt in and Bhutan, capping a wholesale sweep of monarch from their pinacles. So dramatic was the fall of King Gyanendra Bikram Dev from the helm of affairs in Nepal that the king of neighboring Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, voluntarily eschewed absolutism and allowed free and fair elections in his feudal Himalayan kingdom in March 2008. The contagion of Nepal, where a combination of Maoist militancy and “people power” brought King Gyanendra’s crown tumbling to the ground, weighed heavily on the minds of the young Bhutanese king. Avoidance of Gyanendra’s fate was a motive for the guided ‘transition from above’ in Bhutan. This is due to the universal tendency of monarchs to closely follow the fortunes of each other and to learn lessons from the mistakes made by their counterparts elsewhere in the world. Kings stay in touch with other kings and are motivated by the consciousness of the fate of their class as a whole. Gyanendra’s attempt to monopolize all power in his hands through the declaration of emergency in 2005 backfired and rendered him empty handed and palace-less. Thus, the moral of Wangchuk’s deft reformist line of action is that one has to tactically concede a little in order to keep ruling.

I strongly believe that the political turmoil and abolition of the institution of monarchy in neighboring Nepal have strong bearing on King Jigme’s (K4) decision to make the country, at least on paper, a constitutional monarchy after over one hundred years of absolute monarchy. This might have sent a stark reminder to king of Bhutan. Muni tells us that:

There has, of course, been political pressure from the people for democracy in Bhutan decades before the King’s initiative. The Bhutan State Congress launched a futile popular movement for democracy during the early 1950s. Again during the early 1990s, Bhutan witnessed a democratic struggle, which was effectively put down. The possibility of these movements being in the background of King Jigme Singhy’s initiative cannot be ruled out. But the trigger for his move must have been provided by the events in his neighborhood, where centuries of autocratic monarchical rule had turned people violent, giving rise to the Maoist insurgency. There have also been growing concern about the possibility of Maoist influence and infiltration among the ranks of the Bhutanese refugees settled in United Nations camps in Nepal since the early 1990s. The King could also sense the unfolding aspects of globalization where democracy and human rights had come to acquire center stage in political discourse. One would
not know the succession tensions within the Royal family in Bhutan where court intrigues and jealousies had not been unheard phenomena. In all, it was being prudent and farsighted on the part of the King to decide in favor of broadening the base of authority and legitimacy before forces of history overtook the tiny Kingdom. The events in Tibet have borne out the wisdom of the King’s moves.  

As in any other country, a process with such tremendous impact on state and society does not come without any side effects. First of all, it created a power vacuum, which got immediately filled with the newly emerged largely senior echelon of bureaucrats, technocrats, and Western-educated middle class. This was perceived by the politically aware segments of the rural population as the rising significance of this class at the expense of the traditional stakeholders like erstwhile literate Royal Advisory Councilors, National Assembly Members, and village representatives as well as the uneducated, poor population. It is argued here that this will further enhance the socioeconomic inequalities due to a distortion regarding the access to national recourses like political power, governmental posts, and national revenues post-2008 royal democracy.

According to Zakaria’s interpretation, illiberal democracy, the unhappy offspring of the marriage between the new global imperative of democratization and local illiberal traditions, has arisen as an unintended consequence of the worldwide democratic revolution. Bhutan is no exception to this, as illustrated in chapter 4. In this new period, the most obvious danger comes from traditional elites, but a more potent threat to freedom is posed by the rise of “democracy doubles”—regimes that claims to be democratic and may look like democracies, but which rule like autocracies as persuasively demonstrated by the self-styled semi-authoritarian democracy in Bhutan.

The relationship between monarchy and democracy is seemingly paradoxical. Even if the king has introduced semi-authoritarianism political reforms, Bhutan remains staunchly an authoritarian state. The king remains the final authority and arbiter of how far liberalizing reforms to the system may go. Lauri outlines the way under which rulers have argued for an authoritarian state. His framework can be used to depict the authoritarian logic of using democratic rhetoric in Bhutan. The king frequently makes a gesture of democracy in different royal initiatives; however, the constitutional framework stipulates that his supremacy remain in place. Reforms toward democracy are to take place within but not to challenge the king’s authoritarianism framework. This argument is further strengthened by the fact that little democratic change has come about despite the call for inclusive democracy since the 1990s, but in practice the king and the royalists drags their feet on democratic reforms.
The disgusting survival matrix forced upon the civilian masses by the state has been conducive in strengthening the hegemony of the apparatus of the state. This is the main strategy of legitimization under the monarchy. The legitimizations achieved on the basis of the sound working of the overwhelmingly significant repressive institutions of the Driglam Namzha and Tsa-Wa-Sum. These help in sustaining the ethos at the center of which the social institution of servitude occupies an important place. The plights of poor, illiterate, and unprivileged masses, who are victims of the grand nationalist ideology–inspired monolithic practices, are undoubtedly evident to all traveling across and staying in the country. The orchestration of civil servitude is at its peak nowadays under royal democracy.

Apparently the institutional systems of Bhutan allow the king to be above politics, acting as an arbiter while at the same time being at the center of all the state’s institutions, the formal as well as the informal ones. Thus, the king controls the key political actors while circumventing the blame for the failures of the faux democratic game of façade politics. The country’s political liberalization seems a bit sketchy if one takes into account the enormous influence the king and his acquaintances have on the day-to-day conduct of public affairs, a far cry from the touted constitutional monarchy or the treatment of people in South and East Bhutan.

Bhutan authoritarianism has reincarnated itself in the form of “liberalized authoritarianism.” Less tyrannical, it is liberalized in the sense that it is now less prohibitive of political expression. It is able to showcase publicly its liberality, as long as this new mode of authority does not threaten its own power. This reincarnation has made the regime appear less despotic, while ensuring the continuity of the monarchy as the ultimate holder of power in the political arena, even inciting observers and foreign allies to talk about and praise a transition to democracy. This new mode of authority has tamed some of the inside critics of the monarchy by making them participate in the mechanism of liberalized electoral politics as well as excludes those who do not fit with reincarnated royal system. Therefore, the transparency and publicity accompanying regular elections and public deliberations are not necessarily what might allow a political regime to become more democratic.

The royal feudal apparatus led by the palace resisted the pressures for substantial reforms, and it conceded to democratic changes only to achieve its aims; it did, however, lead to some democratic “slippage,” which also played in favor of the regime by projecting a good image and aligning it with democratic
powers in the international arena. The king has introduced clichéd reforms and promises of a better future, but these represent more preparation for the challenges of today, not for the challenges of the future Bhutan. The focus has been on some feudal institutions rather than the king as ruler. Some royalists argue that there has been an increase in transparency and more freedom, but the real power has not ceded from the king. Instead, it is the effective manipulation of state institutions over time, thus allowing the king to be above politics while at the same time at the center of it. The king allows for everyday non-influential politics to go on while controlling the real political changes. In this way, the actors like former Prime Minister Jigme Thinley from the faux political game can be sacrificed as scapegoats without any major effects. So far, the public has seen some cosmetic changes albeit not dealing with the real, democratic deficit of the absolute king.

Eberhard Kienle states “the stronger, the democratization of politics, the more, the actors needs to legitimate themselves in democratic terms.” Indeed, transnational norms such as human rights and democracy pose an increasing challenge to the principle of national sovereignty that has long protected domestic elites, especially in third world countries like Bhutan, where states’ policies concentrate around the leadership and serve its survival from internal and external threats. However, Kovonen notes that authoritarian system has often proven to be consciously dishonest or an expression of naïve idealism. Bhutan’s directed semi-authoritarian democracy shares the same reductionist view of modern politics as a clash between “people power” and the “manipulative power of the royalists and elites.” It is this anti-pluralist vision of society and politics that has propelled the rise of democracy’s doubles in Bhutan. In Donnell and Schmitter’s words, conservatives are entitled hardliners. The conservatives have a more irreducible interpretation of the exercise of political power, consider themselves the true guardians of the regime’s principles, and tend to privilege repression as a means to combat the opposition. Elites in Bhutan use managed semi-authoritarian democracy to prevent the genuine representation of the majority. These elites deploy such institutional elements of democracy as political parties and elections for the sole purpose of helping those in power to stay in power forever. Bhutan has brutally suppressed the opposition and potential political competitions through brutal and sophisticated top-down control. Their strategy is to suppress organization, mobilization, and coordination among citizens. Faced with the threat of change, authoritarian incumbents in Bhutan have used any of these five major strategies— isolation,
marginalization, distribution, repression, and persuasion. The authoritarian royal government attempted to isolate itself from unwanted external influences by refusing to allow more outside visitors or register foreign nongovernmental organizations, particularly after the 1990s crisis in the South and by censoring media outlets. It marginalizes or almost completely eliminates the opposition by presenting the opposition in a highly negative light, such as being antinational, illegal immigrants, corrupt, and unpatriotic. It rewarded loyalists or bought off important or potentially threatening groups. It also punishes by withholding benefits, rents, or income from subversive elites and businesspeople, force challengers into exile, or have them imprisoned or disappear. Finally, the Bhutanese government tries to convince the population that the opposition’s ideals are alien to the country’s history, tradition, and identity, spearheaded by illegal immigrants and funded by Western geopolitical and economic interests. Thus, the government adopted cultural preemption, in which the government attempts to either block the idea of democracy or reform from reaching its citizens or, once those ideas become public, attempt to block their spread or support the idea that democracy is detrimental to Bhutan and its security. The regime could take actions such as isolating the country from perceived external threats, examples of which are foreign media, nongovernmental organizations, or so-called subversive websites, proscribed books and papers critical of monarchy and system, or persuading its citizens that the opposition is somehow “wrong” or that the government is “right” on these issues.

Many studies examine the role of formal institutions in autocracies: political parties, legislatures, elections, and courts. In line with the above literature on the survival of autocrats, these studies consider political institutions in autocracies as means by which dictators hold onto power. Formal institutions in Bhutan are more than window-dressing of feudal past and have a significant impact on kings’ governance and survival by helping coopt Sharchops opponents and mitigating intraregime conflicts. Barman and others argues that authoritarian regimes apply so-called social political leapfrogging in order to keep control over society. Such an approach entails cherry picking reforms in a step-by-step manner and at the same time closely controlled domestic society socially, politically, and economically. For the majority of Bhutanese, semi-authoritarian democracy is but “the tyranny of the former royalist elites.” Bhutan is not an illiberal democracy by default; it is an illiberal democracy by design. Democracy’s doubles in Bhutan can best be understood as an attempt to construct political regimes that mimic democratic institutions but work outside
the logic of political representation and seek to repress any trace of genuine political pluralism. Ferrara contends that: “The blind acceptance of the authorities own version of what is compatible with the country’s distinctiveness political tradition plays right in the hand of the rulers . . . arrogate the authority to define what national identities are really about, and command the persuasive/coercive apparatus to shove their official ideologies down an entire population’s throats.”19

Bhutan’s semi-democracy should be understood as a conscious project and tool to preempt inclusive people democracy. King Jigme (K4) was the inventor of managed semi-authoritarian democracy in Bhutan, and that is the reason he is the principal beneficiary with almost all power intact today. Thus, despite the conventional wisdom, which suggested that the monarchy is an important factor, which stabilizes Bhutan politics, the present emerging proclivity indicates just the opposite. The view that the monarchy is the political stabilizer is in fact only a particular historical perspective, say of the royalists and monarchists. In the political context of the time, the monarchy itself was the central issue of the battle between the status quo and change. Hyper-royalism has emerged as a dominant ideology designed to identify potential enemies of the monarchy and give the practitioners the legitimacy to punish them. Frenzy royalists have built a protective wall surrounding the monarchy, encapsulated within the concept of the monarchy being the most sacred, untouchable, and inviolable institution in a country where democratic institutions have been treated with disdain. The need to worship and respect the monarchy at all costs has come to rule the Bhutanese consciousness. Those who fail to display love and respect for the monarchy, let alone affront it, will be dealt with via the National Security Act of 1992. Hyper-royalism took root and it has proliferated everywhere, in politics, media, and other social units. Such a discourse of the country being an exclusive place for monarchists has become popular and authoritative, being repeatedly referred to by defenders of the monarchy to justify their actions and policies against their political opponents in exile, even when those actions and policies were incompatible with democratic principles.

In Bhutan today, political structures, elite alliance, state institutions, and government practices are seldom watered down post-2008. It replicates the old system and regime with hardly any new faces. In other words, it is the other side of the same coin: the king and the old monarchical system. Bhutan is confronting neopatrimonialism, meaning that they were hyper-royalist, the principal political glue was clientelism, and clientelism was primarily about gaining access to state
power and resources. Elites operated within the political system, often using public office for private gain and for direct access to the resources of the state.

Bhutan’s population comprises three main ethnic groups, none of which constitutes a numerical majority. During the early 1990s, about one-sixth of population of Bhutan, mostly the ethnic Lhortsampas and Sharchops fled to exile to escape persecution for demanding human rights and democracy. According to Bill Frelick, “the continued refusal by Bhutan to allow any of refugees to return home could look like the gloss of Bhutan’s peaceable image is being used to escape international scrutiny and censure.”

What attracted and still attracts outsiders to Bhutan has been the Himalayan mountain ranges and the richly diversified reservoir of flora and fauna. What distinguishes Bhutan as an exclusive nation today is the ethnic cleansing of one-sixth of its population and the forceful articulation of a monolithic conception of nation in public parlance. Such a conception is inspired by the status quoist nationalist ideology. The state is the precursor of such a monotonous conception of the nation. This has remained yet uncovered by the international media. The royal proclamations of late have even required the passionate distortion of the narratives of the social and political history on the one hand and the forceful promulgation of the official history on the other. The history of Southern Bhutan and its local names have been erased and replaced by new nomenclatures. Hutt succinctly reminds us that “during the early 1990s, new names were coined for many villages in Samdrupjonkar while in Kuensel and Government communication, other place names began to adopt spellings, which obscured their Nepali etymologies. Thus, Samchi became Samtse, Sharbang became Sarpang, Chirang became Tsirang and so on.” These have combined with utter callousness and contempt shown to the collective memory of the people. The collective memory is relevant, and therefore must be kept alive. It is time to have the alternative reconstruction of the dynamic history of political unrest, resistance, and rebellion of the masses in the country.

Global society is changing. It is moving toward a single world order, a single civilization. It is moving toward recognition of a multicultural, multiethnic, pluralistic global system. But old ideas take a long time to disappear, particularly when these ideas have been trapped in institutions and attitudes resembling one in Bhutan today. The state presented a Taliban-style “Ngalungnization policy” apparently designed both to undermine any unity of political opposition to the regime and to prepare the way for eventual assimilation of non-Ngalungs groups.
of Southern and Eastern Bhutan. Moreover, it is a strategy to perpetuate old patterns of sociocultural subordination.

The end of the Cold War has led to new issues being placed on the political agenda, including the questions of self-determination and the pursuit of a truly multiethnic global order. At the highest level of abstraction, humanity is evolving toward a global system, which is more complex and more varied, and where the concept of state sovereignty may assume new meanings. Conversely in the isolated Bhutan in the remote part of Himalayas, there is evidence to suggest that many of the Lhotsampas and Sharchops, who remain in Bhutan, are denied rights, including the citizenship documentation and banned from casting their vote. Fernand de Varennes elucidates that:

No noticeable consideration is evident of any attempt in government policy or the newly-adopted “democratic” constitution to take into account the ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity of Bhutan outside of the Buddhist/Drukpa spheres. To put it bluntly, official documentation is largely bereft of any type of recognition of non-Tibeto-Burman minorities in Bhutan. It is arguably not a situation of benign neglect, but one of intentional policy and discriminatory rules to maintain the dominance of the Buddhist and Dzongkha-speaking population. In this sense diversity in Bhutan is simply not admitted—indeed it is perhaps not even tolerated—outside of the officially sanctioned Mahayana Buddhist character of the state apparatus.

Alternative views matter in a democracy. However, a trend has arisen in Bhutan whereby those with such views are labeled as being evil or disloyal. In Bhutan, we see a mixed bag with an unclear bottom line that points to both ongoing pseudo reforms and continued monarchical autocratcy. The real, political participation did not extend beyond state-controlled voting, and there is no true representation of various strata of population in policy making. Bhutanese are found to be a conformist people, and under regime rule, criticism of the elites is nonexistent.

Acemoglu and others argue that “kleptocratic autocrats” apply the “divide and rule” strategy to appropriate resources. According to their view, the elites collude in a dominant coalition that “manipulates the rest of society to create incentives for powerful members of the coalition to limit their use of violence.” The ruling elites, whether they are able to coordinate their own actions or not, often represent a disproportionately small share of the population, both in terms of numbers, and of aggregate power. The literature on patronage and clientelism partly explains the regime’s survival ability in Bhutan. The massive corruption by people in power involving in the public properties is unbridled as can be revealed from the Anti-Corruption Commission’s investigation reports. In the name of nongovernmental organizations, royal
families are involved in the establishment of foundations and associations and building properties in the name of social welfare organizations. In the history of states, the institutionalization of people power has been an unlikely achievement. As power maximizing actors, power elites have a natural tendency to give as little power away as possible. There is the natural resistance among elites to grant civic freedoms to the wider public because such freedom’s limit elite power. To acquire civic freedoms, ordinary people had usually to overcome elite resistance and to struggle for their cause. This is no easy achievement. It requires wider parts of the public to be both capable and willing to mount pressure on power elites. In Bhutan, the absolute system conscripts the supports as well as restricts its supports to elites, traditionalists, and traditional structures through the patron-client network. The political culture is a taboo word in regime history. So there is no question of accommodating opposition in the Bhutanese system. The political culture is such that those who oppose the system are purged, ostracized, penalized, and marginalized as dissidents, and oppositions are read as disloyalty even in the semi-authoritarian democracy. Medha notes: “The domestic discourse on the fault line of minority politics in Bhutan has moreover been conspicuously missing in the public domain. Thus, making inroads into domestic political space in Bhutan can be one of the most daunting challenges.”

Repression is often thought to be the main instrument autocrats use to remain in power. Repression helps autocrats counter perceived threat to their power by imprisoning and torturing opposition members, by eliminating political challenges by crushing anti-regime protest, and by limiting their organizational capacity. David Field Rennie has narrated an appalling tale of how the government deals with opposition. He had mentioned that even for minor offenses, a man would be tied to a stone and dropped in running river alive. Reminiscences of the assassinations of the seventh and eighth Zhabdrung (Dharmaraja) are still fresh in Bhutanese minds, which are revered by all Bhutanese irrespective of faith and religion. Garjaman Gurung, a Southern Bhutanese elite who spoke against the assassinations of Zhabdrung, was brutally murdered in 1921. Gurung was lured into the royal palace in Paro for amicable resolution of differences but his brutal murder speaks volumes of how the oppositions are treated in Bhutan. In 1951, late Masur Chhetri of Chirang, who raised the voice against the autocratic system and demanded democratic change and basic human rights in the country, was arbitrarily arrested, put in a fresh cow skin bag, and thrown alive into running Sunkosh River in front of his family
members and villagers. Kanglung, Shek-tala, a Sharchop, who was initially imprisoned for four years, was thrown alive into the running Punakha River. Due to fear of meeting same fate, many families fled their villages and took refuge in India. At present, there are some two hundred households living since then in India, scattered in Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. The late Rongthong’s brother, who was a director in the Ministry of Home Affairs, was transferred to a northwestern district as its chief district administrator in 1993. Despite knowing about his susceptibility to mountain sickness, he was ordered to accompany a survey team to the Northern borders with the ill intentions to kill him in order to trap Ronthong Kuenley Dorji. This is a typical way of taking revenge by a regime for those who oppose them in traditional and feudal Bhutanese society. He fell ill on the way and despite being in serious condition had to walk for a day to reach the nearest town. He died on the way. Kuenley Dorji was contacted by the Bhutanese ambassador in New Delhi with a message from the king offering him security to come to Bhutan to attend his brother’s funeral. Dorji, informed about the plot and the trap by his supporters in the country, declined the offer. The assassinations of Jigme Paden Dorji, prime minister of Bhutan in 1964, and executions of many senior associates is another example of regime brutality. The torture given to Teknath Rizal and the late Rongthong Kuenley Dorji including many political prisoners in the 1990s and even today, and atrocities meted out to Tibetan refugees in the mid-1970s and Lhotsampas and Sharchops in the 1990s were cold-blooded misdeeds of an autocratic regime against its citizens in Bhutan. The stories of crucifixions of many politically conscious Bhutanese citizens make all the rhetoric of semi-authoritarian democracy in Bhutan.

Bhutanese history has shown no remnant of accommodating opposition except during the reign of the third king, where D. B. Gurung, president of the Bhutan State Congress, and its members were granted amnesty on the condition that they should dissolve their political party and renounce all political activities. The Indian Hindu paper states that “Rongthong Kuenley Dorji, an inveterate Bhutanese democracy and human rights activists, passed away in his [twentieth] year of exile on October 19, 2011 around the time the news about the Bhutanese royal couples’ honeymoon dominates news space.” This mind-set may stand as a big obstacle to democracy as democracy connotes functioning with vibrant and strong oppositions.

Bruce Gilley observes that: “Use of democratic rhetoric can also be part of an attempt to create legitimacy for the regime, since democratic rights along with
good governance and welfare gains have been proven to contribute to state legitimacy."44 The constitution has been drafted by an elite coterie of the king and not by a duly-elected constituent assembly. The new constitution has not addressed the plight of the Lhotsampas and Sharchops and even non-ruling Ngalungs, which have not been given due rights and representation and more than 20 percent of the Bhutanese population, are living in exile since 1988 due to outright ethnic cleansing and transgressions of human rights by repressive regime. S. D. Muni writes: “The disbursement of refugees will not resolve the Bhutan’s ethnic issue, if the Nepalis living in Bhutan and accepted as Bhutanese citizens are not given a sense of belonging and equal participation in its political and economic life.”45 Thus, it would be unfair to claim that Lhotsampas and Sharchops are the only community oppressed and unjustly treated in Bhutan. Except for the few who are at the helms of power, enjoying the benefits of the monarchical system, even Ngalungs not close to the ruling elites suffers from oppression. In fact, the entire Bhutanese people are suppressed by ruling elites and its close coterie.

The rule of King Jigme (K4), particularly from 1990 to 2006, known as the “Years of Viciousness,” was characterized by repression of political dissent, the enforced disappearance of individuals, arbitrary detention of thousands of others, and the systemic use of torture and other ill treatment. The human rights situation has improved to some extent since 2008. However, Amnesty International and other human rights organizations continue to receive reports of torture and other ill treatment by police of political prisoners in Bhutanese prisons.

Capital punishment has now been prohibited in Bhutanese law, but they continue in practice. The perpetrators of torture or other ill treatment continue to enjoy virtual impunity. Judges and prosecutors rarely investigate reports of torture and other ill treatment, meaning no perpetrators are held accountable. Shortcomings of the justice system, such as the absence of lawyers during police interrogation, continue to create conditions conducive to torture and other ill treatment. Torture-tainted “confessions” of political prisoners included in police interrogation reports are still central to securing convictions, at the expense of material evidence and witnesses testifying in court. The numerous torture techniques and other forms of ill treatment have been most commonly documented by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch over the years, and continued reports indicate that several of these are still in use, often in combination while detainees have their hands and ankles tied, and are
blindfolded. As a result, Bhutanese officials accused of torture and other human rights violations between 1985 and 2006 have not been brought to justice and there are no indications that the authorities intend to address this in the future.  

The Bhutanese regime still possesses the capacity to coerce their winning strategy. The critical insights have been toward quieter forms of manipulations that received little media fanfares in Bhutan and outside but still bring about the goal of preserving domestic political order while foreclosing radical change. If political liberalization is still occurring in Bhutan, then it is dead-locked process, a holding pattern of sorts to allow the king and the royalists to protect their absolutists’ fiat while a façade of gradual democratization remains. Thus, the “glossy sheen of royal democracy” rubs off upon closer inspection in Bhutan today.

The media and journalists regularly describe Bhutan as a Shangri-la, and the government’s policy of striving for the GNH is often quoted with approval. These forces have allowed it a privileged status in Western political and media circles. The palace and its publicists are remarkably adept at “selling” this image of a visionary benevolent monarch, each day renewing pledges to serve the poor and move forward toward a modern democracy. The web of mendacity spun by the monarchy is based on an efficient manipulation. Everywhere, the neoliberal media celebrated the “GNH King” and praised his love for freedom of expression and democratic change. However, the political realities here are very starkly problematic. While on the one hand, Bhutan is sometimes presented as innovative with its development being guided by the philosophy of GNH, which emphasizes “a balance between material well-being and the spiritual, emotional and cultural well-being of an individual and the society,” this is at the end nullified by government policies, legislation, and constitution which deny any consideration of the needs that are not those of traditional Buddhist, majority ethnic Bhutanese.

In Bhutan, the concept of divine kingship has remained highly sacred. The Bhutan kings are supposed to perform as Buddhist Dharma rajas, or benign kings, so as to augment their charisma, and subsequently reverence, from their subordinates. The religious sanctity of the throne is indispensable for the existence of the monarchs. It unveils the close intertwining between kingship and religion, and if used wisely, it can enhance further the level of divinity of the monarchs. In Bhutan, the monarchy’s endurance is intricately related to its alliance with the military. Historically, the military was an obligatory defender of the royal institution in Bhutan. Central to the longevity of the Bhutanese
monarchy is the loyalty of the military as the king is the commander in chief of the Bhutanese armed forces.

As countries attempt the transition into democracy and open markets, numerous reforms in governance are necessary. Public institutions must be reconfigured, systems that are responsive and accountable to citizens must be built, and effective economic investment for support and growth created. Such reform efforts tend to concentrate on formal institutions, rules, and procedures. These are important because well-constructed institutions channel people toward equitable and above-board (i.e., non-corrupt) behavior, which is why legal and regulatory reforms often meet hostile responses in societies where they are undertaken. Nonetheless, “formal rules about how political (and administrative) institutions are supposed to work are often poor guides to what actually happens.”

Unfortunately, the king continued to enforce the centrality and the inviolability of the royal power, and declined to expand political freedom much further. There are no gestures indicating departure from his father’s style. The king remained a prisoner of an authoritarian system that he seemed unable to change. The average Bhutanese wondered if rampant injustice and corruption could ever be eliminated as long as King Jigme’s (K4) smoke screen of the old guard of royal advisors, family members, dignitaries, and generals, who became so powerful under his reign, were still positioned at King Keshar’s (K5) side.

Decision making is dominated by a few individuals privileged by birth, not by merit. Bhutan lacks the means to mediate citizen grievances or to ensure accountability. Institutions for organizing political opposition are limited or nonexistent. Traditional checks on government authority—a free press, an independent judiciary, and a strong civil society—are either lacking or kept intentionally weak in Bhutan. Ruling families have entrenched skills at anticipating, and preventing, opposition before it explodes. The regime leaders are astute political chameleons, changing their outside appearance to match the issues of the day, while maintaining their hold on power. So far, the king appears to be acting in the best tradition of the reforming monarch, but he has indicated no readiness to allow his power to be curbed by strong institutions, let alone to accept a full transition to a true constitutional monarchy, where the king rules but does not govern. Thus, unless the power of the king is curtailed and counterbalanced by that of institutions over which he has no control, talk of democratization in Bhutan is disputable.

The Bhutanese monarchy remained credible to people because of their administrative institutionalization, including their ability to delegate certain
powers to elected bodies and depict themselves as the legitimate authority in their country. These institutions, such as parliaments and government bureaucracies, represent the first tier of public affairs management, which the monarchy has successfully and consistently manipulated, when necessary. The monarchy’s ability to deflect popular discontent by maneuvering these intermediate bodies connotes that it enjoys power without responsibility. In other words, the king has been able to retain the credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of citizens by delegating limited powers to elected bodies, such as the largely defenseless National Assembly and National Council, thereby creating an institutional buffer zone between monarch and citizenry. In short, these institutions have responsibility without power, while the monarch’s ability to deflect popular discontent by stage-managing these intermediate institutions enjoys power without responsibility. The classic fall of Jigme Thinley, former prime minister, due to his alleged links with China even though with full consent of the king, coherently explained maneuvering the first tier of public affairs management, which the monarchy had successfully and consistently manipulated, when hard-pressed by India about the monarchy’s intentions.

The judiciary cannot be free in a context where the rule of law is weak, favoritism is practiced, and corruption is dominant. These broad notes on some of the major features that help in measuring the democratic spirit of a political system demonstrate that the country has a long way to go. Royal democracy seems not to have influenced the democratization of the “deep state”—the palace and bureaucracy in Bhutan political diction that permeates all sectors. The political, economic, and social problems and refugee crisis, high level of bureaucratization, and high rates of corruption records compared to regional and international standards are clear signs that the reforms started, especially since 2000, have not yet challenged the “deep state” structures. Using Karvonen’s categories, the transitional argument for authoritarianism seems to match the situation in Bhutan, with the king frequently calling for democracy in different royal initiatives, while the constitutional framework stipulates that his supremacy remains in place. Reform toward democracy is to take place within but not to defy the authoritarian framework. This argument is further strengthened by the fact that little democratic change seems to come about, despite all the public exclaims for democracy. Instead, I caution that in practice the king and his government drag their feet on democratic reform. The maneuvering in relation to the election system lends further weight to the view that the authoritarian logic underlies the democratic rhetoric. Bhutan is thus an
emblematic paradigm of a semi-authoritarian state and an archetypal case of transition of traditional regime in traditional society.

The regime’s authoritarian institutional architecture remains intact and is the fundamental reason why it is impossible for it to undergo a gradual democratization in Bhutan. For different reasons, the feudal power structure is resistant to change as well. Major power brokers—the royal court, royal family members, conservative elites, religious authorities, heads of security branches, senior military officers, powerful secretaries, and judges and police chiefs—oppose any reform that threatens their entrenched interests. It is difficult to imagine how the system can be reformed with these groups still ensconced in power and privilege.

Carothers has argued that it is useless to associate hybrid regimes with democracy—for him, it is simplistic to assume that hybrid or “gray area” regimes are simply incomplete democracies. In fact, they may not undergo any political change at all and represent a potential new type of regime-semi-authoritarianism. There needs to be a transformation of the society that enables horizontal, vertical, and social accountability, as well as substantive democratic processes that not only empower the poorer segments of the community, but also result in a substantial improvement of the conditions under which the majority resides. If this does not happen, it runs the risk of what Mkandawire calls a “choice less democracy or a democracy of tears.”

In order to become a democratic country, Bhutan must restrict the power of the monarchy and allow parties in exile to return and contest election, as well institutionalize the real powers and allow elected institutions accountable to the voters to play a real role in governance. In other words, Bhutan has to move toward becoming a real constitutional state. Reform of the political system, as well as more far-reaching policy reform, depends on the emergence of independent political forces that the king can neither suppress nor coopt. By definition, such forces would have to be political movements with large political bases, and thus not dependent on the king’s largesse for their survival as realistically perceived in the present-day Bhutan. Norms of compromise among elites must be internalized as well as externally enforced by some system of checks and balances.

CONCLUSION
Democracy cannot be an altruistic “gift from the monarch from above.” The political opening engineered by King Jigme (K4) is now recognized as steps toward reconfiguring authoritarianism rather than a process of democratization that would constrain the power of the monarchy. The media has been quick to praise Bhutan’s democratic transformation from the 1990s through today. Hindsight is always clear, but it remains puzzling how so many people were duped into believing the sincerity of the monarchy in terms of substantive political reform. Why would a king who holds supreme power over an entire nation relinquish that power without contestation? Nevertheless, the prevailing attitude in academic circles was that when the king gifted the constitution, he not only satisfied fundamental demands of exile parties and presaged the emergence of an electoral democracy, but he also provided the occasion for more debate and intellectual engagement over the underlying makeup of Bhutanese society and its government post-2008. The political situation in Bhutan has continued unchanged because of the tactics of suppression and depoliticization used by the monarchy. From the refugees, anti-nationals, and the fragmentation of political parties in exile, to the offering of religious, social, and cultural solutions to political problems, the monarchy finds itself in firm control of the direction of the country and has effectively subordinated all other political institutions. The king remains the ultimate authority and possesses an absolute veto.

Bhutan is still not a democracy. Bhutan is not considered a democracy due to “shadow powers” and prerogatives still possessed by the monarchy. The royalist parties pledge allegiance to the king’s “one nation, one people,” Tsa-Wa-Sum,\textsuperscript{52} and the GNH. Semi-authoritarian democracy in Bhutan has been more act of grafting than a process of growth. It has been grafted in a soil accustomed to more than a hundred years of autocratic monarchy. Real democratization in Bhutan requires an act of “reconciliation by Wangchuk king” that appears unlikely in the present context. This connotes that the royal incumbent accept true parliamentary governance and opposition in exile. Bhutan today presents a paradox of semi-authoritarianism rule in traditional political system. It is a synergistic state. Bhutan, therefore, still lacks a political culture, which could help the growth of democracy. Bhutan is still beset by a mismatch between authoritarian political culture with old institutions, which has raised doubts and concerns about the quality of democracy in the country. Having the state-controlled election is not everything, since democracy is not simply a machine that once set up, functions by itself. It depends on the liberal democrats and their political culture, which should conform to the rules of democratic institutions.
The authoritarian political culture of the political elites has distorted the democratic institutions. As such, Bhutan cannot be considered a democracy. Rather, it can be argued to be more of a “semi-authoritarian type of democracy” with authoritarian institutions and autocratic political behavior.

Therefore, one can state that terms such as democracy used to describe the current political system do not match the reality. Ultimately, Bhutan remains a democracy doubles. The autocracy runs deep in Bhutan elite’s consciousness. Today, double-faced figures “democracy and autocracy or autocracy and democracy” of the king still loom large in the minds of Bhutan’s political thinkers as they puzzle over the significance of the 2006 event. It has been alleged that self-democratizing monarchies are rare in recent history. More often, they are overthrown. In the case of Europe, the transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy took decades or centuries. Kings, even the most benevolent, don’t often give up their power willingly. The major challenge of today is how to make the top-down model work and how to achieve a shift toward sustainable inclusive democracy. The next chapter endeavors to study the present royal rhetoric and likelihood of inclusive democracy in Bhutan.

NOTES

2. Siegfried O. Wolf in Panorama has unearthed these issues in details.
3. This refers to Samuel Huntington’s phrase.
10. See L. Karvonen, Diktatur. On Africal Political System (Stockholm: SNS Förlag, 2008), 68.


36. For more details, see chapters 2 and 3 of this book; also consult Druk National Congress, Bhutan Today, 3 (2011).


39. Rescue helicopters are sent to evacuate even the junior-most soldiers, when their condition is life-threatening, but in the case of Dorji’s brother, who was the senior-most government officer of the district, no helicopter was sent.

40. For details, refer to Druk National Congress, Bhutan Today, 3 (2011).

41. Teknath Rizal, the royal advisory councilor, wrote a letter to the king requesting that he must humbly pay heed to the people’s complaints about census. However, the king put Teknath Rizal behind bars. He was forced to suffer unbearable pains for ten long years. He was released in 1999, when the king’s officials realized that he could die in prison due to illness. He is now living an exiled life in Nepal and leading the anti-monarchy struggle. Rizal hails from Lhotsompa community.

42. The popular leader of Sharchop community, Rongthong Kunley Dorji, was arrested by the monarchy and charged with supporting the demand of minimum democracy. The king seized his property and put him in the jail, where he was subjected to severe torture and was finally pressed out of the country along with his family. He was arrested by the Indian police on his arrival in India in 1996 to garner political support from India, and was put in Tihar prison for two years on request of King Jigme. He passed away in 2011. He was also leading the anti-monarchy struggles. He was the founding president of Druk National Congress.


46. Refer to T. N. Rizal, From Place to Prison (Kathmandu: Oxford International Publication, 2009), xxi–xxii.


49. Refer to chapter 7 of this book on Bhutan-China relations and India’s concerns.


52. Refers to king, country, and people.
Previous studies have generated a range of literature on process and factors that affect democratic prospects. These attributes can be brought into play to identify nations comparable to Bhutan. The best prediction of a nation’s level of democracy is its past level. Despite theoretical differences, most explanations concur that democratization is a necessarily slow process. Structural explanations, whether in the modernization or dependency traditions, contend that democratization unfolds slowly because it requires complex, multifaceted evolution in the political, social, and economic realms.

Actor-oriented explanations that attribute greater importance to elite behavior see democratic possibilities in a broader range of circumstances, but they are scarcely more optimistic concerning the time frame required. They generally portray democratic transitions as a staged process that begins with a democratic opening (i.e., the breakdown of an authoritarian regime), then catalog a democratic breakthrough, and conclude with democratic consolidation. While the first two of these stages can usually be identified as discrete events triggered by identifiable agents, democratic consolidation—“the process by which a newly established democratic regime becomes sufficiently durable that a return to non-democratic rule is no longer likely”—is inherently a longer-term proposition. This is also where most transitions break down. Power and Gasiorowski reported that nearly a third of third world democracies collapse before the first (post-founding) election, about half before the first change in power has been effected, and more than 60 percent within twelve years. Viewed from either of these schools of thought, it is not hard to see why rapid democratization is rare. Democratic consolidation must take time because the conditions necessary for it are themselves the outcomes of protracted processes.

Describing the Bhutanese regime in such terms, however, may not resonate with the predominant, albeit erroneous, perception that many outsiders have of Bhutan as an exemplary case of a regime in South Asia, steadily moving toward modernity and democracy. It has been demonstrated in previous chapters, as
well as elucidated in this chapter, that this perception of Bhutan as an unpretentious regime, all in favor of reform, is indeed symptomatic of a vision that has a major unsighted spot.

It is therefore in the broad context of unpacking this lopsided vision that the present chapter sets out to demonstrate that what lies behind the self-ascribed disguise of a reformist regime is a grim face of a tyrannical monarchy that owes its legitimacy and hence longevity to sheer absolute rule and state repression. Evidently, the self-legitimating discourses of the Bhutanese monarchical regime have already been challenged and unsettled in many ways by critical minds inside and outside of Bhutan. Based on these studies, in order to set the record straight, this chapter attempts to breathe some new life into the rhetoric and prospects of democracy in Bhutan. The Bhutanese state must assume a democratic form in which executive power is subordinated to the rule of law. Enticements for law-based behavior must be institutionalized, and Bhutanese elites must be habituated to honor the constraints they impose. Mechanisms and procedures must be empowered to keep office holders accountable to the public will, and agencies must arise to animate them. Thus, the focus of this chapter is to first analyze the rhetoric of royal democracy and then delineates the prospects of inclusive democracy in Bhutan followed by analysis and conclusion.

THE RHETORIC OF ROYAL DEMOCRACY

Bhutan is a typical example of an authoritarian state that makes use of democratic rhetoric while staunchly remaining within the confines of an authoritarian constitution. It is a country confronting the profound challenges of moving away from 108 years of inconsiderate Wangchuk autocratic rule. Royal democracy is a myth that paints the facade of democracy. The camouflage of one kind of authoritarian regime is yet not democracy but a new form of semi-authoritarian rule. Holding government-controlled elections alone does not offer a cure for deeper political, economic, and social problems besetting Bhutan today and does not present a prolific pedestal for a democratic transition. This bubble of semi-authoritarian democracy is a “Jigmecracy.” On the one hand, it tends to see the sporadic cosmetic reforms, carried out by the regime under certain circumstances, as impressive achievements. On the other, it fails, wittingly or unwittingly, to engage rigorously the regime’s widely recognized crisis and its deplorable conduct as concerning human rights and democratic rule.
There are two conventional perceptions about political reform in Bhutan. The first is to enumerate the actions necessary to transform the political system into one that is more democratic. The second is to envision the political course that might lead to the enactment of these actions. However, as has been the case thus far, these measures are likely to take the form of discrete steps, intended to introduce limited change in very specific areas rather than stimulate a sustained process of democratic transformation. Indeed, reform appears to be driven by a quest for modernization, not for popular participation and government accountability. To date, there is no indication that Bhutan is becoming a democratic country in which power resides in institutions accountable to the electorate. Instead, the king remains the dominant religious and political authority in the country and the main driver of the reform process. All new measures have been introduced from the top, as the result of decisions taken by the king.

History has shown that even those who rose to power with good intentions soon became despots. They took advantage of their position to enrich themselves and their families and friends. Then to protect their wealth and power, they silenced those who threatened their authority. As one injustice led to another, and as their friends became fewer, they grew increasingly paranoid and oppressive. They desperately clung to power in fear that if they lost control then they might also lose their fortunes, their freedom, and possibly even their lives. Bhutan’s state of affairs represents a parallel predicament. Bhutan is deeply entrenched and anti-democratic, internally divided over its commitment to reforms, devastating legacies of political repression, and atrocious government ridden with corruptions.

Today the king has the power to appoint a prime minister and government, to terminate the government and parliament at will, and to exercise legislative power. A veritable shadow royal palace keeps an eye on the operations of all ministries and government departments. Not only are important decisions taken by the palace, but their execution is also micromanaged by the royal palace. The question thus is not whether Bhutan will continue its democratic transformation, because, contrary to the views of some, such a transformation has not even started. The real questions are whether the reforms enacted so far make further change inevitable, and whether the balance of political forces that exists in the country and in exile today can force the king to accept limits on his power, leading in the foreseeable future to a democratic transformation. Introduction of the royal constitution as a reform process had started but left that pattern of
domination intact, even enhancing it in key ways. The present king tried to give the system an aura of modernity and democratic decorum by defining it as a “constitutional monarchy,” an intelligent label that disguises the fact that the constitution in no way limits the power of the monarchy. Przeworski states that:

the political, opening taking a country further away from authoritarian rule . . . is always intended as a process controlled from the above. It is usually not a process prompted with the intention of bringing about a democratic regime; rather, the initiating fraction within the authoritarian regime typically aims at bringing about a less restrictive authoritarian compared to the status quo, by carefully starting a process of democratization although keeping it under strict control.7

Defending the institution of the monarchy, which is officially considered the pinnacle of Bhutan’s sacred and secular life, is the primary requirement of national security. That reform has seen the mobilization of reenergized royalism and the creation of royalist political parties that are part of a new terrain of social conflict. In the recent period, the slogan of the “Gross National Happiness, Tsa-Wa-Sum, and One Nation, One People Policy” has become the convenient umbrella for organizing political sentiments around the monarch. When confronted, since the 1990s, with this compelling fact about the real nature of its monarchy and that it is incompatible with the democratic principles of modern constitutional monarchies, the Bhutanese regime frequently resorts to the argument that it has its own distinctive form of a democratic constitutional monarchy that is grounded in the country’s Buddhist historical and cultural specificity. Here is where the peculiar formula sustaining the regime’s assumed legitimacy is evoked in order to bear out this contention.

To tighten its grip on everything temporal or spiritual in the country today, the king has also relied on the royal palace, which is the expression of the group including King Jigme (K4), royal family members, royal businesspeople, conservatives elites, and the military, who constitute the power behind the throne and which are generally perceived as the conservative class traditionally controlling Bhutan politics and economy. To concede itself some illusion of democratic legitimacy and of public support to its institutions, the regime has also been known of orchestrating all types of elections since 2008. As has been demonstrated in chapter 4, coercion always plagues first and second specious elections and with fabricating high voter turnouts and seemingly fair results. Furthermore, instead of consolidating a fair political game, the so-called two-party electoral system in Bhutan is used essentially as a method to select, control, and replicate submissive and corruptible political elite. As far as human rights in Bhutan are concerned, the security apparatus is notorious for having
been involved in unspeakable practices of terror, arbitrary detention, and gross violations of human rights since 1988. A cursory glance at the successive reports released by Amnesty International and other human rights organizations clearly reveal the gravity of the situation of human rights in Bhutan. It is a common belief that Bhutan in the present day has two kings—Jigme (K4) and his son Jigme Khesar (K5). The real and legitimate referee, player, and absolute power wielder and game changer is King Jigme (K4), as he holds and pulls the filament of power from behind the royal scene, and the present king is just a favorite raison d’être and officials were acting upon the Jigme’s (K4) direct orders.

The king’s strong constitutional power was enhanced by religion. The king is considered to be a reincarnation of Bodhisattvas and Zhabdrung, the supreme religious authority in the country. Furthermore, the king could draw on the traditional network of monarchical institutions—the elite of palace retainers, administrators, and military officers—but eventually embracing all persons in the service of the monarchy and connected to it by entrenched patronage networks. The monarchy controlling not only power but also economic resources was key to social mobility and even security. Today few political parties were allowed to exist, but the king’s strategies of cooption rendered them largely ineffective. He coopted party leaders, pitted exile parties against one another so that no group could become strong enough to challenge his power, and encouraged the creation of new political organizations, particularly in the second election in 2013 to divide and check old ones he saw as threatening, if any. Geertz writes, in a famous passage: “At the political center of any complexly organized society, there are both a governing elite and a set of symbolic forms expressing the fact that it is in truth governing. The elite justify their existence and order their actions in terms of a collection of appurtenances that they have either inherited or, in more revolutionary situations, invented.” It is unerringly the inherited Bhutanese crown that is the nucleus of everything in Bhutan. The Bhutanese polity in the past several decades vacillated between “bureaucratic and monarchy tutelage” on the one hand, and a “debilitating authoritarian” on the other. To borrow a cliché, Bhutan is at a crossroads today. Bhutan has introduced a semi-authoritarian royal democracy. The people of Bhutan are not sovereign, and the attitude of the elites is the rule rather than serving typically reflecting traditional authority system.

Geertz’s analysis of the role of political symbolism and ritual in asserting the centrality of any given order or regime has informed and enriched the work of many historians looking at cultural aspects of rule and political authority, and
mine is no exception in the case of Bhutan. Marking “the center as center” is exactly what was at stake for the Bhutanese monarch, who, as we have seen, was compelled to step into the feedback loop; identify the dominant political, economic, social, and ideological currents in the country no matter how contradictory; and posture himself symbolically at the nexus of them all. Consequently, my analysis has focused on the “trappings and appurtenances” of monarchical rule to which Geertz alludes, such as coronations and other ceremonial practices, as well as media representations, since I believe that these kinds of sources reflect most evocatively the nature of the monarch’s consistent forays into the political, economic, cultural, and social arenas in Bhutan. Fernand succinctly notes:

Broadly speaking, many laws and policies of Bhutan have a huge discriminatory impact, tend to exclude any recognition of cultural diversity, impose an ethnic concept of the state that marginalizes or excludes many minorities, especially those of a non-Buddhist background. As for the Constitution, in addition to the major concerns outlined previously where it clearly breaches fundamental human rights standards, there are a number of other sections that seemed inconsistent with what is expected under international human rights law.¹⁰

Bhutan is a plural society regarding religion, language, and customs, but the constitution declares it to be Buddhist state; the constitution talks about the concept of equality but differentiates between nation’s language and national language, between men and women based on ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines. Walcott tells us: “Challenges include the degree of homogeneity desirable under the doctrine of ‘One Nation, One People Policy.’”¹¹ A closer deliberation of these issues in Bhutan, and how the supposedly “democratic” constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan appears to enshrine the denial of the international human rights of very large segments of the population of Bhutan, follows.¹²

Civil society, like independent media and political society such as political parties, must flourish if democratic norms are to guide political and social behavior. In Bhutan, policy dissent is not tolerated and authority challenge is not protected. Election is not made meaningful by widespread, well-informed political participation. Civic or democratic political culture does not descend from the sky. It needs to be taught and learned. Patriotism is love of one’s country and the willingness to sacrifice for the betterment of society. Even patriotism, when combined with self-righteousness, can degenerate into what Samuel Johnson¹³ called “the last refuge of the scoundrel,” as we have witnessed in Bhutan today. Sentiments that redeem patriotism and make it human are commitments to the values of political equality, social justice, economic
fairness, and cultural plurality. A patriot takes pride in human achievements and has enough confidence in the country to tolerate dissent. However, this is absent in Bhutan. Patriotism is not grounded in practicality and nationality. Nationalism, on the other hand, in Bhutan is such a lofty perception that it does not need ground beneath its feet to stand upon. Predating history, nationalism sources itself to myths, symbols, and legends that have bestowed special qualities and purity upon the people’s destiny in Bhutan. Unlike nationality, nationalism does not create a relationship of rights, duties, and obligations between the state-nation and its citizens in Bhutan. What nationalism in Bhutan does instead is recognizing the “self” and ostracizes everyone else as the inimical “another anti-national.” Thereafter, one’s nation is destined for greatness. In case something goes wrong, it must be the fault of “outsiders” camouflaged as “anti-national.” All non-ruling and non-Buddhists are inherently suspects, and manufacturing uniformity is essential to build unity out of diversities. Some people think that dissent is unpatriotic. However, I agree with Howard Zinn, a historian and author of A People’s History of the United States, and would argue that dissent is the highest form of patriotism. In fact, if patriotism signifies being true to the principles for which your country is supposed to stand, then certainly the right to dissent is one of those principles. And if the Bhutanese people are putting into practice that right to dissent, it is a patriotic act unlike the perception of the ruling regime to look at them as anti-national. All these values have become so ingrained that questioning their relevance is interpreted as treachery. Political concepts of secularism and inclusion not only questions the established values of so-called *unity in diversity* but seeks to establish an alternative set of ideas to respect diversities within unity. The relationship of individualized man in the world is his commonality with mankind as a free and independent individual. The confidence to build such solidarity comes from pride in one’s primary identity and not its denial under pressure of conforming to establish notions of nationalism based on the inconsequential “one nation, one people” ideology as we have been witnessing in Bhutan these days.

Joseph argued that the king’s “democratization project” is intended at “silencing the demand for real democracy that the democratic movement of Bhutanese people, who were expelled from the country, had raised.” They were “to hoodwink the international community” into accepting that Bhutan was a democracy. By harping too much on the glories of the past and symbols of Nglung identity, the king and royalists may unwittingly be undermining the very
cause that they seek to promote: “longevity of Bhutanese identity.” The nationality of the future would be based not upon “mythical national community” but a very practical law-based country composed of “self-confident communities of nations” within the nation-state of Bhutan.

Even the present chairperson of the National Council has accepted that the Bhutanese polity is same despite so-called political reforms introduced by the king. Kinga notes:

The evolution of the Bhutanese state in the last four centuries took place in an existing polity that was predominantly Buddhist. That Buddhist polity was founded by Zhabdrung Rinpoche in an existing religious community. The village-based polities of eastern, central and western Bhutan were unified into a national polity. Different forms of state subsequently became expressions of that polity. The states did not create different polities. The polity continued through time. Thus, we have a distinct historical journey of a polity that is “rosarial” information. The religious community that formed under the influence of Guru Rinpoche, the ecclesiocratic state founded by Zhabdrung Rinpoche, the monarchy established in 1907, the modern nation state built by King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck and a parliamentary democracy introduced by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck are different political expressions of the same polity. Like beads of a rosary, these states became expressions of the Bhutanese polity at different times.16

Another royalist notes: “The role of the king of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuk, is clearly set out in the constitution. His role is broader and more specific than that of the constitutional heads of European monarchies, but staggeringly less powerful than any traditional monarchy, emirate and sultanate.”17 In Bhutan, glorifying the king insinuates adoration of the nation, and opposing the king connotes being disloyal to the homeland. I argue that this is the mark of a dictatorship. Should the Bhutanese be loyal to the king, the institution of monarchy, or to the nation of Bhutan? The Bhutanese king is believed to be a reincarnation of Buddha and Zhabdrung. This lineage makes the king an honored religious personality. Because of this status, the king carries dual roles as ruler of the political state and as the highest religious authority in the country. The king is able to use religious symbolism and rhetoric to reach out to the Bhutanese and bypass the everyday political process. I argue that since these religious, cultural, and nationalist identities are tied to value that the members of the society believe are beneficial, the appeals to them helped the king to maintain his power. Because of his dual role as political and religious leader of Bhutan, disobeying a command from the king is both a civil and religious offense, punishable under the National Security Act of 1992.

The Bhutanese king possesses an extra measure of legitimacy, owing to their intimate relationship with their subjects. This intimacy is an extension of the relationship to the people; the king is the “father of the nation.” In various ways,
kings claim dynastic and religious legitimacy simultaneously, enabling them to place themselves above their countries’ social and political divisions. For example, the Bhutanese national anthem is all about the king. It highlights the efforts of the Bhutanese monarchy to present itself as the unifying symbol at the center of the state and therefore as an irreplaceable part of the state’s political and social identity.

The Tsa-Wa-Sum is an official slogan emanating from the core of the nationalist ideology of unbridled loyalty to the king and patriotism demanded from the masses for the sake of national unity and integrity of the county. It is a modern weapon having its origin in the invented tradition and custom of the nation. It is a highly evasive and slippery concept. The literal meaning of the terminology is “king, country, and people.” It actually articulates the faith in patriotism. In essence, it however works as a device to protect the hegemony of the state machinery. It is employed to indoctrinate the masses as well. The national policies, programs, and directives issued by the government are all justified to be in accordance with the guiding principles of Tsa-Wa-Sum. The sound working of these institutions combined with the nationalist ideology of maintaining a paternalistic regulated society has simply meant that the freedom of civilian population is causality. The bureaucrats, technocrats, feudal lords, and royalists of the yesteryears are the business magnets and political barons today, the ordinary citizenry are bonded and their voices scuttled. Power was increasingly placed in the hands of the powerful, the royalist parties did not offer much in the way of ideological distinction, and the public was apathetic about the chance for political change through the normal political process. The parties in exiles are fragmented and in disarray. The king’s central position in the government, and his involvement with the political and economic elites, led many Bhutanese to believe that democracy would be impossible without the leadership of the king. Also the military does not have their own system for choosing and promoting officers without undue interference from king in Bhutan as the king is the commander in chief of armed forces. The Bhutanese military has great incentive to help the king to maintain his power.

Since the king is attached to a series of traditions, he can make claims back upon these traditions to provide himself more time to make the reforms that the people are demanding. Protecting the “sacred institutions,” which broadly includes the monarchy and Buddhism, was used as a reason that change must be small or incremental. I also note that Bhutan’s king was able to use “sacred
institutions” as a fallback cushion when the demand for democracy and human rights in the 1990s shook the corridors of power in Thimphu.

The king is given a set of tools to which he can refer to keep the people on his side. One method that the monarch used during the pro-democracy movement in the 1990s to stay in power was to make direct appeals to nationalism and royal tradition. King Jigme (K4) uses his centrality in the political system to bring into power groups that support his agenda, while at the same time excluding those that do not. The creation of an in-group/out-group dynamic allows the king to keep the loyalty of the groups that have been accommodated into parliament today. Because of the king’s activity in the political sphere, by managing which groups are allowed into power in parliament, he has been able to manufacture a “politics of consensus” that makes challenging his authority more difficult. I agree with Benchemsi’s18 statement that “kings, in fact, encourage a certain amount of pluralism because the king is able to serve as the “linchpin of the political system” and that he is able to “balance, manipulate, and control societies characterized by vertical cleavages.” Another factor is that since the king is the head of the country constitutionally, religiously, and symbolically, he is able to manipulate not only the political realm, but also religious doctrine to make challenges to his authority less legitimate in the eyes of Bhutanese people.

In Bhutan, the relationship between monarchy and democracy is seemingly paradoxical. The king launches initiatives to promote political reform but still the country remains an authoritarian state. The king repeatedly reconfirms his allegiance to democracy, but few results are apparent on the ground. Why is Bhutan still under scrutiny with respect to monarchy, democracy, and the much celebrated free and fair elections? The rulers have always maintained that the country is free and the government enjoys legitimacy. However, calls for scrutiny emerge from the fact that there are reports of human rights abuses, along with the questions of census, political prisoners, and refugee issues that have not yet been resolved under the so-called royal democratic government.

Bhutanese society has repeatedly proved itself vulnerable to manipulation from above and exploitation of its fragmentation and rivalries among local communities. Such manipulation has occurred at different levels, sometimes pitting one ethnic group against another and sometimes splitting local communities of the same ethnic background since the 1990s. The elites of Bhutan adopted the model of nationhood, which is state centered and assimilationist. Nation for a leader constituted a culturally homogenous population. In this formulation, the royalist and monarchist political elites
choose a dominant ruling community as a model of the nation while minority Lhotsampas and Sharchops were expected to assimilate themselves into the mainstream, even though they represent more than almost 85 percent of the Bhutanese population. In this construction, nation and state become synonymous with them and consequently, state policies—political, sociocultural, and economic, as well as the military—adopted in the national or state interest become a tool for consolidating the dominant position.

In light of this perceived vulnerability, over the past several decades, Bhutan has instituted increasingly restrictive laws on citizenship and embarked on an aggressive effort to build an “ideology of peoplehood,” fortifying a conception of national identity around the characteristics of Bhutan’s politically dominant ethnic group, the Ngalung. For instance, the government declared Dzongkha as a national language in 1961, mandated a national dress gho and kira in 1988, and retroactively limited birthright citizenship to those born to two Bhutanese parents in 1985, effectively denationalizing ethnic minorities, who were citizens under previous laws. To counter growing critical views of the monarchy, powerful royalists have put into effect hyper-royalism by exploiting the National Security Act of 1992 as an alternative weapon. The Tsa-Wa-Sum states that defamatory comments about the kings, queens, and royal family members are punishable by life in prison. Conservative elites argued that because of ascriptive status, they should have political, economic, sociocultural, and administrative dominance in the political system. They want their language, lore, religion, traditions, and symbols to be adopted by all to create a monolithic state in multiethnic, multilingual, and multireligious society.

The relation between ethnic minorities and the government has been trapped in a vicious circle of protests, revolts, and suppression. Bhutan’s political system has become adapted to the ethnic heterogeneity of its population in such a way that political power is concentrated in the hands of the traditional ruling monarchy and royalist. The Ngalung constitute the dominant ethnic group. The rights of the Nepalese in the Southern districts are limited. Ethnic nepotism has powered ethnic conflicts in Bhutan. The autocratic political system is not adapted to accommodate ethnic interests. As a hegemonically controlled system in Bhutan, political power is concentrated in the hands of one particular ethnic group Ngalungs, which is sufficiently strong to maintain hierarchical relations between ethnic groups. The traditional political system of Bhutan was close to the model of hegemonic control. In Bhutan, domestic peace was maintained until the 1990s through the hegemony of one particular ethnic group (Ngalungs) and
the monarchy. The system seems to have failed in its attempt to integrate and to subjugate the minority. Bhutan’s political system is based on the hegemony of the ruling elite and their ethnic group. As such, the system is vulnerable.\textsuperscript{22}

Some analysts believe that the constitution has little meaning in reality, and the state is pursuing policies of religious, linguistic, and cultural unity at the expense of minority rights. Bhutan is clearly a country that must come to terms with ethnic diversity if its territorial integrity or, at least, its political stability is to remain unthreatened. What they encountered instead was a system that frowned on anything distinctive to an ethnic minority, be it language, religion, culture, or even territorial identification. The elites failed to concede that political, sociocultural, and economic democracy and diversity is the best way to assert national identity, not through ideologically bankrupt narrow cultural homogenization based on a “one nation, one people theory” as it does not have a firm theory of integration. Kinga notes:

The modernity of Bhutanese state is defined by interdependence between secularism and spirituality embodied by the persona of King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. It is not the modernity based on western secularism because both the origins of the state and its historical formations are rooted in the interwoven dynamics of religion and politics. Secularism is not the rationale of Bhutanese state.\textsuperscript{23}

Most importantly, the conservative section demonstrates that many leading figures in Bhutanese society, including members of the interlocking royal, corporate, bureaucratic, and military elites, are reluctant to consistently embrace democratic processes. In order to explain the reluctance of the conservative group to consistently acknowledge democratic institutions, it is worth considering the more general character of Bhutanese democracy, in which elite prerogatives tend to dominate and there is habitual disregard for alternative views. In this context, Hewison\textsuperscript{24} points to a process of conservative democratization whereas Connors\textsuperscript{25} analyzes the webs of political influence that have made the boundaries between democratic and non-democratic politics hard to discern. He proposes that contests to decide the rules of political interaction have continued to disrupt efforts to strengthen democratic institutions. Given the skewed balance of power between the king and royalist political parties, electoral rules are largely determined from above. Strong kings shape electoral rules such that the rules bolster their power rather than undermine it. Monarchs prefer rules that dispose power to a limited number of competing elite groups within the royal coterie and royalist groups. Democratic reform was thus tied inexorably with the king and his actions and motivations. It was through this
method that the standpatters could be appeased, and the reformers in the regime could maintain some level of control over the process.

In order for democracy to succeed, the Bhutanese king must transfer his source of traditional legitimacy over to these institutions. This has not happened. I maintain the role and actions of the king have prevented real democracy from being able to grow and mature, due to his continued hold over traditional legitimacy and authority. As British scholar Vernon wrote, “Constitutional Monarchy is a contradiction in terms, because, by definition, monarchy is an absolutist system of government.” Constitutional monarchies work in other countries because there the monarchy has given up his traditional source of legitimacy. The reforms in Bhutan will continue to suffer until this full transfer of power takes place and society can turn away from the king as the institution of ultimate resort. Several scholars see the Bhutan monarchy and king as the preserver and vanguard of conservative and nationalist values.

Kuru analyzes state policies toward religion and provided a typology of state to classify them in terms of four types: secular states, religious states, states with an established religion, and anti-religious states. Secular states share two broad characteristics: their legislative and judicial processes fall outside of institutional religious control, and their constitution establishes neutrality toward religions. Religious states, by contrast, ground their legislative and judicial systems in religious laws and courts. Bhutan falls in the category of religious state as its legislative and judicial processes are grounded on religious laws and courts and institutional religious control. Thus, the present system is based on feudalism in a primitive social-cultural setup and centered on the tenet of Tsa-Wa-Sum; it has failed to inspire the majority on the political periphery as it has failed to institute democratically inclusive political, economic, and social order and corresponding measures of social and economic justice. The total system still revolves around a king and royal palace rather than shift from king and royal palace to inclusive democratic system that sustain itself. Siegfried notes:

> The political transition is overshadowed by a restrictive cultural policy (Driglam namzha), which was branded as the Bhutanization of people. This is gaining momentum since the society of a country is multiethnic; being not composed of several distinct communities regarding ethnicity, social structures, belief, and language but also host to so call indigenous people as well as immigrants.

According to Brownlee, a strong political approach allows the authoritarian regime to legitimize structure and process that bolsters their strong repressive apparatus, from security forces to censorship of media. The National Security Act of 1992 was often used to curtail citizens’ rights and criminalize any action
deemed harmful to the position, interest, and privileges of monarchy and ruling elites. The royal constitution is perpetuating a form of disguised racial discrimination. Thus, it is crystal clear that if democracy is ruled by people, democracy is absent in Bhutan. The Bhutanese are deprived of civil and political rights; freedom of speech, press, and association; and rule of law sufficient to ensure that political competition and participation are meaningful and authentic in reality even though it exists in paper. There is no competition for state power through free election. The party in exile is not permitted to register nor allowed to participate in elections.

Bhutan witnessed the birth of the classic semi-authoritarian regime as democracy doubles that is characterized by the system in which there are no opportunities for political mobilization. Thus, the Bhutanese are subjected to the parochial mind-set of the regime, depriving them from enjoying human rights, freedom, and democratic aspirations. Bhutan in no sense is democracy in the Western definition of that term. It is completely controlled by elitist conservatives’ oligarchy, obedient to the king and dependent upon him for its combined access to power, privilege, and wealth.

The Nglung is the most privileged and patronized ethnic sect; the Lhotshampa the least privileged, rather neglected by the state machinery. The ruling and power elite positions are occupied by the Lyonpo, the Dasho, and the Rabdey. The Druk Gyalpo, the royal family, and the National Council and National Assembly members and civil servants stand at the top in power, status, and prestige. The dominant positions give them the edge over value formations in the traditional society. Thus, the royal constitution enacted by the king and his coterie was a charter that aimed to manufacture uniformity under the “one language, one dress, and one person” modus operandi. Through automaton conformity, one changes the self to the preferred type of the society. School children are taught, for example, not to critically question their teachers about dominant positions—the king and royal family members and government. The reform is just trying to offer a few crumbs to demonstrate the façade democratic credentials, and this ruse is fooling all.

The governmental structure has no fundamental elements of a democracy, and ultimate power rests with the king alone. The little power the branches of government do have come from him. The constitution affords the king power to appoint and remove from office prime minister and ministers, dissolve the parliament, revise the constitution, and rule by royal decree. Members of parliament can be detained, arrested, or prosecuted if they happen to express an
opinion or cast a vote that is injurious to the monarchical system, the religion of Buddhism, or is derogatory to the respect owed the king. He controls the distribution of resources and sets forth the political regulations. The king decides who can participate in politics and establishes the boundaries for which political actors can operate. In essence, Bhutan’s constitution establishes a government that acts as an instrument of the royal will. The system was designed to include an electoral quotient. Today, the royal palace is a clientele network of royal patrons composed primarily of ministers, royal family members, regional and district administrators, royal business elite, and members of the military. Together, this network acts as a proxy arm for the palace, furthering the king’s agenda in exchange for either clandestine business contracts or social positioning among the elites of Bhutan. Adding to the structural impediments that the legislature faces, there is no separation between Buddhism and state in Bhutan politics, and there is a very close interconnectedness between the throne and Buddhism. The king is deemed “supreme religious figure” by virtue of the Bhutan constitution, and the royal family’s lineage is allegedly traced back to the reincarnation of Buddha and Zhabdrung. It is possible that the king’s religious authority and connection to Buddhism fosters a transcendental mentality, which in turn contributes to the hegemonic role of the monarchy.

There is officially only one history, one culture; one language and one social project imposed on the masses through the one nation, one people policy. The parts of the history and elements of culture have of late been purposively selected from the past and reconstructed into an “invented” tradition of the nation. The nationalist official ideology permits the ruling oligarchy to attain the national agenda through the two core medieval social institutions of Driglam Namzha and Tsa-Wa-Sum. The core institutions are centered at maintenance of patron-clientele relations at the level of decentralized units of society, based on customs and traditions of feudal medieval Bhutan. The power elite and ruling oligarchy uses these institutions and the invented tradition for the so-called cultural solidarity program and national integration policy. The cultural plurality of a heterogeneous and segmented society has conclusively been underplayed by the state, and the populist nationalist ideology has recently embarked upon the project of cultural revivalism—a cultural monolith. The polity is founded on hierarchic structures symbolizing the levels of power and coercion. Despite attempts to project the façade of formal structures of democratization and decentralization by the Bhutanese kings, the political system is basically governed by the despotism of monarchy in substantive spirit. Thus, royal
democracy is the preposterous rhetoric. The king sought to sweep his rule under a cloak of democracy in order to legitimize it both at home and abroad. The king articulated his political system in such a way to legitimize the continuing political autonomy and the perpetuation of his preeminent role in the uniquely Bhutanese form of government.

Albertus and Menaldo found that increased coercive capacity under autocracy has a strong negative upshot on both a country’s level of democracy as well as the likelihood of democratization, if the country is autocratic, and that these results are robust to model specification, potential endogeneity, and alternative explanations. Given the history of oscillation between liberalization and repression, it is clear that Bhutan has not yet introduced nor embraced the process of democratization. In Bhutan, the reality is that its structure and ethos were permeated by sycophantic supports for the old system. Much of the institutional architecture of authoritarianism, including state monopolies on the electronic media, bureaucracies and security agencies, and repressive libel and/or internal security laws, is left intact.

The second general elections and the positive publicity around democracy in Bhutan do look attractive to many in the international community. The process has gathered its own momentum, so to speak. It could be argued that there is the public relations strategy at work. Bhutan, as a country, has somehow always been romanticized by the media. Most of the news coverage talk about the extremely benevolent Monarch with his unique economic policy called Gross National Happiness. In Bhutan, democracy is understood as a “gift” given to its citizens by the king. The king has been adept at playing to many sides. Domestically, he could coopt members of various parties, squelch dissent, crush enemies, and still be regarded by many as a beloved monarch. On the international front, he could be a trusted king. The relationship between the king and his subjects was often described as paternal. Moreover, the fact that the king has been able to claim lineage from Buddha and Zhabdrung has further endeared him in the hearts of Bhutanese. To be sure, the longevity of the Wangchuk dynasty contributed to the king’s prestige as did a series of myths and symbols encouraged and often created by the monarchy to promote its own legitimacy. The national anthem of Bhutan illustrates the trinity of the monarch’s foundation: Buddha, king, and country. Symbols supporting this idea are found throughout Bhutan. By linking himself to Buddha and Zhabdrung, the monarch ensures that challenges to his divine right to rule are indeed challenges to
Buddha and Zhabdrung. To challenge any of these tenets invites arrest under the National Security Act of 1992.

The monarch has the right to land and citizenship kidu, although it was illegal to talk about or question the royal family’s assets. As such, the monarchy was able to dole out its acres as land kidu to coopt with newly emerged elite members into its fold. Being in good graces with the monarch denotes wealth, and being out of favor has been dangerous. When cooptation failed, the regime silenced opposition through a variety of techniques including arrests, torture, disappearances, and murder. The punishment often extended beyond the dissenter to his/her family, as was demonstrated by the silencing and reported detention of Jigme Y. Thinley, former prime minister, for submitting petitions alleging fraud and irregularities in the second election in 2013, condemning the army and royal office.

King Jigme (K4) understood that the techniques employed to stifle the exile opposition were becoming internationally unacceptable and thought it prudent to introduce some cosmetic reforms without curtailing his own powers, particularly after the demise of the Cold War. Thus, two political layers were created in Bhutan, one where the actual power lies and another where the political parties operate. This has created an illusion that has enabled the monarchy to give the impression that party system is at work. The right for final approval of prime minister and cabinet ministers, head of constitutional bodies, secretaries, district administrators, and other high-ranking bureaucrats suggests that the recently administered changes, including the royal constitution, were part of the king’s tradition of a democracy shell game. This game has consisted of political reforms, including constitution and elections, and the coopting of the emerging educated middle class, all of which continually thwarted any attempt at real reforms demanded by opposition in exile. So the question now is whether King Khesar (K5) will initiate an era of real democracy or will he be unwilling or unable to break the cycle of power his father has set in motion?

Democratic political culture does not easily emerged out of a society socialized in the ways of monarchical rule. This raises certain questions. Will the monarch be able to restrain his constitutional powers and be willing to allow the kind of opposition necessary for a political and civil society? Can Bhutan uphold a genuine civil society? And will the monarchy be willing to both foster and allow its growth? More subtly, it is noted that the obstacles to democracy are many and include the general acceptance of authority in Buddhist tradition.
New governments are often filled with elites from the old regime, and they inherit many of the politicized and authoritarian institutions that had characterized the previous regime. Former Prime Minister Jigme Thinley and present Tsering Tobgay governments thus inherits all of the tools of coercion and abuse that characterized the previous regime of King Jigme (K4) as they are also a part of the previous regime. In other words, neither the players change nor the playing field remains even. The system excluded the groups that do not fit within a straitjacket of Jigmecracy. Manipulation of symbols of nationalism and exclusion of others from the political process that do not fit the profile of a new regime made the present system for all its rhetoric commitments to reform. Kuensel, the government mouthpiece, notes: “Today, in the fourth year of our transition to a parliamentary system of governance and about a year short of the second general elections, not many seem to know or understand about new political system.”

From the outside, therefore, Bhutan appears democratic, when in reality it is not. In fact, much of the authoritarian structure developed by King Jigme (K4) remains in place today. Despite the notable array of institutions that appear democratic—a bicameral legislature, two-party system, electoral competition, and a government composed primarily of royalist party members—no significant power has devolved outside the regime. For that reason, Bhutan has been categorized as a “semi-authoritarian democracy,” a governmental system that combines minimum civil liberties with political authoritarianism. It has been very successful in perpetuating a democratic façade that has allowed them to appease domestic, regional, and international constituencies.

A country that has monarchy may be a democratic country not because it has a monarchy, but because its monarchy has no absolute power. This is not the state of affairs in Bhutan as the monarchy is the most powerful institution and parliament is subservient to it. Since the institution of monarchy is a permanent institution, we find that it has gathered the most royalist individuals around it. Theories of political science, history, and universal sagacity enlighten us that if we want democracy, it needs to make democrats as powerful as possible and the anti-democrats and the royalist as weak as possible. The ultimate key to the survival of the Bhutanese monarchical institution, therefore, rests on the way in which it acts and reacts in a complementary manner to the rising desire of the people for inclusive democracy. Thus, unless the power of the king is curtailed and counterbalanced by that of institutions over which he has no control, talk of democratization in Bhutan is controversial.
THE PROSPECTS OF DEMOCRACY IN BHUTAN

Many are critical and assert that it is a controlled royal democracy and the monarchy commands everything in Bhutan. The central issue is that the political system is set up in such a way that large-scale political change in Bhutan is very dependent upon the king’s wish due to his authority, position, and resources. No system could be secured that does not command long-term deep-rooted support at the mass level. Without such support, the regime is vulnerable to decay and then to collapse. It is in this sense that “the core process of consolidation” is legitimation. Democracies therefore become consolidated only when both significant elites and an overwhelming proportion of ordinary citizens see democracy, in Linz and Stepan’s incisive phrase, as “the only game in town.”

Regardless of how donors, journalists, academics, think-tanks, diplomats, and others in the international community rate the extent of democracy in Bhutan, this form of semi-authoritarianism democracy doubles can be consolidated only if the Bhutanese perceives that royal democracy is the only and best form of government for them. The Bhutanese citizens are the final arbiters of Bhutanese democracy and its legitimacy.

Bhutan changeover from highly personalistic regime will confront considerable challenges. Bhutan transitioning from strong institutionalized authoritarian systems requires the type of full institutional reform. The king and palace are “the nucleus of the country’s political system.” The king and his inner circle of family and royal supporters were Bhutan’s most important political, economic, and social actors, and the present dispensation did little to change that fact. There remain significant challenges for the future of semi-authoritarianism democracy in Bhutan.

Although the royal constitution of Bhutan creates minimum democratic institutions, such as a parliament and two-party system, the practice of royal democracy in Bhutan is flawed. In part, this is because of a mismatch between institutional design in the constitution and institutional practice in daily life. Bhutan’s political institutions are also heavily beholden to the king, a relationship that is codified as well as merely being practiced. The king’s position at the center of the Bhutan political sphere meant and continues to mean that any political changes that are necessary need to be made through hard negotiations with the king. In Bhutan, the monarchy is an independent variable that affects all the other political variables. The monarchy is not under serious questioning. I argue that there exists a conflictual relationship between the
monarchy and semi-authoritarianism democracy. Two major reasons can be cited for this conflictual relationship: the ambiguity in the constitution and the weaknesses of the royalist political parties in Bhutan. Robert Dahl cautions that: “what appear superficially to be changes of regime are sometimes not really changes in regime at all, but simply changes in personnel, rhetoric, and empty constitutional prescriptions.” This exactly describes the king’s reforms in Bhutan. The problem of royal democracy, therefore, is not only that the genuine elections and political parties are absent, but rather that they are ineffective in making real change because of their relative powerlessness vis-à-vis the king and the palace. Pro-democracy parties in exile allege that the multiparty system is mostly used as a “mechanism to select, control, and replicate a docile and dependent political elite,” not to promote actual democratic outcomes.

What has marked the country’s political development since the mid-1990s following the introduction of institutional processes through the holding of state-controlled elections is an incipient two-party political system. However, this has resulted in neither a full-fledged authoritarian state nor a viable democracy, but a “frontage royal democracy.” This would not entail the protection of a core cluster of political rights, such as freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and the right to vote and run for office in free, fair, and periodic elections. In terms of political rights, it is obvious that there has been no remarkable progress. On the contrary, these rights have been subjected to a whole array of government restrictions, from judicial harassment to limitations on freedom of assembly and association. In sum, the Bhutanese king succeeded in instituting a new authoritarianism.

Compounding the problem is the fact that the royalist political parties in Bhutan are too weak to bring about democratic change. As conferred in chapter 4, their weakness could be attributed to the constitutionally derived bias in favor of the king, which has kept the parties in a docile state from which they cannot emerge. Also, the constitutional bias makes it so the parliament is in essence ineffective. Many Bhutanese fail to recognize this, so they unjustly blame the parties for the political dormancy, which has created a trend where the majority parties do not fare well at the subsequent elections. The parties’ ideological wavering between nationalism based on Tsa-Wa-Sum and royal democracy and the structural inability to fulfill their function as mechanisms of mass political integration and representation.

Another problem with the royal institutions established in Bhutan is that the people do not trust these institutions. In the second parliamentary elections, the
turnout was a historic low, with less than 50 percent of registered voters casting a ballot. The first parliamentary elections after the royal constitutional process, held in 2008, yielded a more than 50 percent turnout of registered voters. One reason that turnout is so low is that the political parties do not offer much in the way of ideological distinction. The opposition, at least those groups that are in parliament, do not differentiate themselves much from the parties that have formed the government, and because of this, they have difficulty in mobilizing mass constituencies. Party elections, it is believed, are mostly a spectacle staged for the benefit of the Western media, because they are designed to make sure that the opposition wins enough seats to remain part of the system but never enough to really change or challenge it. The fact remains that the dynamics of power between elected parliament and the Bhutan king led to a situation where parliament had power on paper only. As such, these institutions did not work in a manner that seemed to be bringing any real change to the people they served.

Democracy in Bhutan is an uphill task. One important factor that can be used to explain the shortcoming of democratization process is the country’s historical legacy of strong autocratic rule. To be sure, from before the Zhabdrung rule through the Wangchucks period, a succession of authoritarian regimes has ruled the Bhutanese society. In the vast and growing literature on democratic transition and consolidation, there is widespread agreement that political parties and party systems must play a vital role, whether in Africa or Latin America. Further, there is a general perception that the contribution of the parties gets increasingly important as the process evolves and is especially central to successful consolidation. The outcome of the first election to the National Assembly shows that the world’s newest semi-authoritarianism democracy had one of the world’s smallest opposition, with just two members in parliament in 2008. Of the forty-seven seats in the National Assembly, forty-five were won by the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa, while the People’s Democratic Party has no one left in the assembly to oppose the ruling party; some disturbing signs of moving toward a dominant-power system. At least in the 2013 election, the opposition has fifteen members. However, the lines between the king, the state, and the royalist ruling and opposition parties are becoming blurred.

The latter two problems present a greater hurdle because both exist independent of the government. These problems cannot be remedied only through legislation; instead, the problems require a shift in psyche of the Bhutanese public. The paradigm shifts of this nature would seemingly take years, if not generations, due to simple apathy and the complex level of entrenchment that “politics as
usual” has assumed in Bhutan. It is clear that the Bhutanese parliament fails to live up to the Western standard. One critical role for any successful legislature is the ability to temper the excessive initiative of the executive. As demonstrated throughout this book, the Bhutanese parliament has not fared well on this front. The king wields unchecked power, and the parliament remains a subordinate institution. Political autonomy is another perquisite to legitimacy. The monarchy has found a variety of ways to infiltrate the Bhutanese legislature. The constitution permits the king to remove from office any member of parliament or dissolve the institution entirely—together, these powers spoil any form of political autonomy. In order to have a functioning legislature, the components of the legislature must operate effectively. That is, there must be effective political parties that present alternative choices. In Bhutan, the political parties have been unsuccessful in acting as the link between the citizens and the government. Instead, the king has used the parties as a link and buffer between him and people. The Bhutanese parliament has been bogged down by legislatures who are loyal to the king. Not to be mistaken, Bhutan may have come some way in terms of civil liberties and individual freedom, but the theoretical democratic institutions possess neither the clout nor the ability to initiate a political transformation worthy of being labeled democratic. This continues to be the case unless there is a real unification and push by the Bhutanese people and political parties to pressure the king into transferring authority to subjects that exists outside of his peripheral control. Otherwise stated, devolution of power will not be ushered in by the monarchy. The deliberate character of semi-authoritarian regimes also forces the reconsideration of the visually appealing image of countries that fail to democratize because they are caught in a “reverse wave.”

Political parties are the backbone of any functioning representative democracy. They are the agents that compete in the political arena for public office by offering programmatic alternatives to the voters. It is not surprising, therefore, that an analysis of countries that have failed to democratize shows political parties suffering from a severe pathology that renders them weak institutions. The ideological weakness of parties of power and their dependence on the state is both a symptom and a cause of the failure of democratic consolidation. Because they prevent the emergence of a multiparty system based on competing ideology—programmatic currents—these parties and their legacies should be seen as an important stumbling block in the transition toward and consolidation of democracy. Bhutan persuasively spells out this phenomenon as political parties have to function as a backbone with strong ideological power to push the
country toward democratization. Being created from above, these parties are not meant to become autonomous political forces in their own right, but are utilized by the ruling elites as instruments of cooptation, sometimes even coercion and political hegemony. To begin with, they simply serve the regime to sustain a network of patronage relationships with the major sociopolitical, economic, and administrative actors of the country. By using the patronage networks, in fact, the regime seeks to ensure its very survival by granting these actors access to the spoils system of the state in return for their complacency concerning the existing order. In Bhutan, royalist parties simply exist to serve the monarchy and to preserve and protect their own interest and privileges and network of patronage relationship rather than for real change in Bhutan.

I make a case that beyond the formal system, power has been exercised by the royal palace through patronage. In the case of Bhutan, there is much evidence to support the hypothesis that political parties function simply as providers of legitimacy for the incumbents and as avenues of control of popular attitudes. In 2012/2013, the king put into effect a strategy of “divide et impera” by, for instance, covertly sponsoring the creation of a new party with the intention of undermining support for an existing political party perceived to be a threat, particularly Druk Phuensum Tshogpa. The regimes interfere in the internal affairs of individual parties in exile by playing on existing divisions within them sponsoring rifts and splits. Bhutan is a significant example of the mixed strategies incumbents utilize to remain in power and highlights how processes of supposed democratization are under the strict control of the wielders of power. The strong reliance on divide et impera measures is due, mainly, to two factors. On the one hand, Bhutanese society needed to breathe some fresh air, as it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain such strict control over it. King Jigme (K4) understood this, and he introduced liberalizing reforms. On the other hand, the international community has become much more reluctant to turn a blind eye on widespread repression and human rights abuses. All this has therefore led the monarch and his advisers to rely almost completely on a strategy of survival based on the perception of the king’s indispensability through careful manipulation and management of the country’s political and social actors.

The recent statement of Prime Minister Tobgay clearly supports this notion that king is the center of everything in Bhutan. He elucidates that: “As an indispensible traditional institution, the Monarchy is the symbol of Bhutanese nationhood, sovereignty and national identity. This is embodied in His Majesty
the King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, who is the guiding light and unifying force for the country.42 Most ordinary citizens believe that political parties are discredited and cannot be agents for change. The state of the party system has led to the de-politicization of the Bhutanese citizenry, allowing the king to appear as the only dynamic and active actor who needs to be “left alone” to work for the improvement of the country.

The king is the commander in chief of armed forces. The Bhutanese military had great enticements to help the king to maintain his power. The higher ranks of both the security forces and the military are filled with relatives and allies of the king, and they are personally interested in the regime’s survival. The author argues that since the higher ranks within the security forces and the army is filled with relatives and allies of the king—a move that not only attempts to prevent military rebellion, but also gives members of these institutions stronger incentives to back the king or the government against the demands of inclusive democracy—this coalition of interests between monarchy and coercive forces may act as impediments for the prospect of democracy in Bhutan.

Civil society (e.g., independent media) and political society (e.g., political parties) must flourish if democratic norms are to guide political and social behavior.43 The other working example, which provides testimony for the weak prospect of democracy in Bhutan, is local elections, where parties cannot field candidates due to stringent requirements to contest election. Parties do not have strong membership nor have networks with rural people at the local level. Also, parties cannot afford to have such networks due to paucity of funds. Another case in point is the media, which is very weak, and this may act as a constraint for furthering democracy. In a country like Bhutan, policy dissent must be tolerated and authority challenges must be protected. Elections must be made meaningful by widespread, well-informed political participation.

I argue that the elites are part of spoils system and tainted in Bhutan, and thus any change can be as a result not, as Geddes44 claims, from the elites and their discourse and alliance structure, but from the motion outside of the elites. The institutions are designed to be debilitating, provoking competitions between actors, thus making it exceptionally difficult to garner enough power to exact change from within the present Bhutanese system. It is not enough for the opposition to coalesce around a symbolic figure—they must coalesce around a real leader with sufficient power. This leader, however, if he or she is to arise out of the system, can be tainted by the royal system through which power was gained. A push must then come from outside. Bhutan has a history of active and
energetic struggle for democracy since the 1950s. Had the opposition been willing to choose one leader and throw all of their power behind that person, or if any of the leaders had been able to collect enough individual power to pose a real threat, Bhutan would have had a tipping factor that, on top of all of the other indicators that marked Bhutan as ready for change, plus the king’s weakness, might have triggered a strong democratic reform. Upon examining this institutional structure of Bhutan today, I unearth one factor vital to Bhutan achieving a democratic transition: to augment the chances of democracy in Bhutan, a strong leader must emerge who can organize the opposition, either by virtue of his or her own power or the conglomeration of power to which he or she has access to all, while avoiding becoming tainted by the royal system through which that individual gained power.

Some of the literature on democratization contends that civil society activism is of fundamental importance for any process of democratization and that in the absence of a formal political opposition organized around political parties, civil society organizations can take on the role of effective opposition and enter into a bargaining game with the incumbent authoritarian ruler and force them to democratize the system. As Entelis put it: “without a well-developed civil society, it is difficult, if not impossible, to have an atmosphere supportive of democracy.” However, there has been no royal enthusiasm to foster the development of a healthy civil society in Bhutan. The vast majority of these organizations do not have explicit political objectives. Such activism has not, however, led to an acceleration of the process of democratization or to a weakening of the authoritarian set-up. The activism of civil society on a number of fronts and the pressure of their demands has, paradoxically, strengthened the king’s grip on power. After having continued in the manipulation of the two-party system to serve the interests of the crown, the king has been able to do the same with civil society. The king has decided to enter civil society through the creation of organizations and foundations that are formally independent at the frontage, but are in actuality connected to the royal palace and royal family members and dependent on it for funding. The palace has encouraged royal family members to open civil society organizations. Far from weakening the monarchy, the activism of royal-sponsored civil society constitutes an asset for the king because the ideological differences that exist within the nongovernmental organization sector and the diversity of issues they represent can be utilized to pick partners and rivals according to the changing situation. In addition, the lack of a truly responsive and functioning party system mean that
lobbying from civil society has to target the monarch rendering him indispensable, if change is to be made on the issue that a given nongovernmental organization is interested in promoting. This indispensable role, “sacralized” in certain cases by the religious legitimacy that the monarch enjoys, further strengthens his grip on the executive and impedes the reform process.

Bhutan’s biggest challenge to democratic reform lies in the current structure of its government: vast powers vested in the king and conversely few in the elected parliament or in the judiciary. Although these reforms have been praised in the international community, they have not given the Bhutanese people more freedom or representation. Indeed, skeptics both at home and abroad have called these reforms “cosmetic,” designed to appease the public and the West sufficient to maintain the peace and the flow of development aid. I called this “self-protective royal democratization,” in which regimes implement risk-free, cosmetic reforms that give the citizens an outlet to vent but little more. By having elected parliaments and periodic state-controlled elections, Bhutan’s king can deflect citizen demands, while getting the international legitimacy he craves. In both political and academic communities, Bhutan has often been cited as a democracy. Yet, a close examination of the political structure in Bhutan exposes the window-dressing status of the legislature and the divine will of the king.

Bhutan has reaped large volume of diplomatic praise, economic aid, and other assistance from Western powers and India. In practice, the political system no more resembles a two-party electoral democracy than so-called radical states like Iran, Syria, and Morocco. Today, they have juxtaposed modernity and tradition in strategic ways. Arroub and Yom note: “when their attack growing too stringent, they are probably silencing but preferable through legal web of bureaucratic restrictions and institutional co-optation rather than blunt hand of outright state violence as in past decade.” In Bhutan, such symbolic power combines with relatively stable coalitions of elite loyalty make the landscape for radical opposition evenly difficult. The royalists have enacted political changes to support autocratic continuity.

The analysis has also shown that, despite the fact that Bhutan nominally possesses a royal constitution that provides for minimum institutions such as the parliament and a two-party system, the country is still a traditional and absolute monarchy underpinned by a complex set of myths and religious and psychological concepts, which partly explains its longevity and the stability of its rule. As a result, bearing in mind that Bhutanese society has persistently been socialized and coerced into accepting the monarchy’s absolute rule, it is unlikely
that the country would experience any genuine democratic change, not least under the existing political structures that are being used for the sole purpose of perpetuating the monarchical system and thwarting the prospect of any real systemic change. This is indeed a crucial issue that the Bhutanese people would have to tackle before hoping for any real change in their political situation. To bring forth any tangible reforms in Bhutan, it should be willing to press the authoritarian regime to embrace genuine structural reforms and be accountable for the gross violations of human rights that it has perpetrated against its own people and others in the past. Democratic movement gut feelings have jostled with the king’s efforts to maintain bureaucratic and royalist influences, with sporadic reforms and interventions reasserting the legitimacy of the king in the face of electoral mandates. For that royalist network, one aim of the post-royal reforms was to guarantee sufficient space for non-elected authorities to continue holding sway, and to see off any perceived threats to their status. A semi-authoritarian regime paints the façade of democracy without really being democratic. While one cannot rule out some transformative process due to some liberal members in parliament from a self-effacing middle-class background, few are willing to rock the boat. The challenge of opposition was to compete openly with the established “network monarchy.” The historical infrastructure of monarchical power, the coalitional networks of indigenous support, and new institutional techniques of the regime have made the monarchy of Bhutan virtually impregnable to dissents and oppositions. As a nation comparable to Bhutan in many ways—politically, economically, and socioculturally—Nepal took almost three decades to transit from “Panchayat system” (1960–1990) similar to that of Bhutan’s “Jigmecray” of today. Thus, the prospects of transitions to liberal democracy for Bhutan appear slim in the foreseeable future.

THE KING AS A MODERNIZER AND NOT A DEMOCRATIC REFORMER

The reforms in Bhutan characterize transformations from above that are initiated and led by the king and incumbent regime. They are exemplified by slow reforms and include limited and state-proscribed broadening of freedoms of speech, press, association, and political participation. They are those in which the authoritarian elites are determined to maintain power and not bring about democracy. Reforms are often met by internal and international skepticism. The Bhutan case shows that a ruler is not necessarily going to employ tactics that will
undermine his own power. Both the kings are acclaimed as potential liberators, democratizers, and as the kings of the Bhutanese people. They have shown quite considerable skill in manipulating the opposition in exile and in strengthening their own rule.

There seems to be no real opposition force in the political scene. At least for now, the monarchists are the only political group running the show. Royalist bureaucrats and civil servants continue to occupy important positions in the government. The heavy reliance on the king’s policy preference may impede the development of political parties in Bhutan. In essence, if all parties wish to follow the king’s path, there is little difference in the policies or platforms of each party. In such case, party politics may be of marginal utility or significance to Bhutan’s political system. Moreover, the transition to semi-authoritarian democracy in Bhutan after centuries of monarchical rule can certainly give rise to “royalists” or “monarchists,” who continue to be prominent on the political scene for years to come. To put it in comparative perspective, that is what occurred in Thailand, where the royalists prompted a coup in 2006, more than seventy years after the end of monarchy active rule, to topple a democratically elected government. If the present crisis is not managed with care and sensitivity, Bhutan may also tread the path of confrontation and risks the recent fate of Nepal, which has suffered a bitter civil war and whose king has now become a commoner.

Bhutan neatly fits into an Ottaway’s concept of a semi-authoritarian regime, which emphasizes ambiguities “that combine rhetorical acceptance of liberal democracy, the existence of semi democratic institutions, and a limited sphere of civil and political liberties with illiberal or even authoritarian traits.” Furthermore, this ambiguous character is deliberate in Bhutan, a part of a strategy meant to maintain the appearance of democracy without the political risks that free competition entails. After years, Bhutan has adopted autocratic imperatives to fit new domestic and international circumstances, and has strategies to captivate Western support. In the current climate, I conclude that systematic political change in Bhutan is unlikely. Propositions about gradual reform along the path of state-led liberalization dominate the political parlors of Bhutan for the reason that Bhutan prefers that change be conceptualized in a piecemeal term rather than “the whole or nothing approach.” Thus, any prospect of democratic political change in Bhutan rests on a conjuncture of forces that have a material interest and political will in transforming the state. The weight of the monarchy may reduce the likelihood of change, but it is important to
recognize that even radical change is not precluded in Bhutan, if it can birth, nurture, or cultivate a charismatic leader who can mobilize the Bhutanese from all walks of life as premeditated above. The palace’s great strength is also its acute weakness, and the stability of the regime rests entirely on one man and his ability to manipulate the powerful symbols of the monarchy.

I reflect on Carother’s call to move beyond what he calls the “transition paradigm.” It is now clear that hopes of democratization in Bhutan were overly optimistic. The authoritarian regime has survived through cosmetic changes. The camouflage of one kind of authoritarian regime is yet not democracy but a new form of semi-authoritarian rule. For those who want a Bhutan monarchy along the lines of Western Europe, this mean drastically reducing the power of the king and abolishing the Tsa-Wa-Sum, the National Security Act of 1992, and all crawling and subservience to a so-called sanctified king.

The review is a comprehensive overview on the development of the Bhutanese political system as well as a sobering appraisal of what this bubble of incipient and semi-authoritarian democracy in Bhutan can be expected to achieve. Bhutan is a tricky case for Western policy makers and academic in supporting genuine political reform. The reforms in Bhutan are by and large modified and artificially altered so as to produce desired characteristics. Reforms in Bhutan are genetically customized; it is not organic and it is not a bottom-up process. It is artificial and is to produce a desired outcome for the king and royalists. Democracy discourses channeled by the royalists serve their interest rather than the interest of the general public. Thus, the king made some concessions in order to maintain the stability of his regime and to preserve his image.

This raises a number of issues concerning how democratic processes could be strengthened and an inclusive and substantial democracy consolidated. From the point of view of the king, the reforms were to be used primarily to stabilize the regime. The objective was to preserve the absolute monarchy and prevent both a potential regime change from the outside and an internal pressure. The king did not want to “democratize Bhutan from the top” as it was erroneously portrayed in the West. He allowed as little change as was required to meet the minimum demands both from within the country and from the outside. Consequently, the king is “not a democratic reformer, but a modernizer.” He is not interested in structural reforms that could result in the redistribution of power. His partial liberalization tactics have essentially served to stabilize the power of his family and safeguard the regime.
CONCLUSION

It is argued that the limited structural transformations in the Bhutanese society has not developed key components that would have enticed a change in regime. Bhutan today is an immensely imbalanced nation of a relatively flourishing economy with a repressive sociopolitical system. The whole “infrastructure” of the society—economic and political development, class structure—had not changed and a new political culture had not set in motion to articulate itself, and a civil society had not risen to challenge the power of the state. Therefore, the king and his royal superstructure could stay the same. The liberalization reforms carried out by monarchs have not created critical mass to push for inclusive change. The king has pursued an unconventional modernization which failed to engender the key components for regime change, unlike other countries, and at the same time accommodate the growing educated middle class and introduce some reforms to fit its socioeconomic base: to become a little democratic as conversed in this book.

This analysis has shown that the slowly paced liberalization of politics, economy, and society has so far produced no threat to the stability of the Bhutanese king. In this sense, the king has for now achieved his objective of stabilization and immediate prospect for inclusive democracy is slim. This means centralized power vested in the king’s regime hold together a quite cohesive state apparatus, a firm grip on the economy by royal family members while at the same time paying much attention to disguising authoritarian personalized rule as democracy to Bhutanese people. The tendency of Western officials and India to praise Bhutan’s reform, even if they are flawed or incomplete, has an indirect effect in reinforcing the authoritarian regime and weakening real demand for democracy since the early 1990s.

As has been reflected in chapter 1 of the book, Bhutan and India have historical, geographical, economic, political, religious, and sociocultural links as well as a relentless flow of population and goods across the borders since British rule in India. Although the United States, China, and other European countries are making fast inroads into Bhutan’s political landscape, India being a close neighbor, major development partner, the key regional actor, and an emerging global player can play a worthy and instrumental role in encouraging inclusive democracy politically, economically, and socioculturally as well as resolving the long-standing refugee crisis by supporting “national reconciliation” between the
king and moderate democratic forces in exile and inside Bhutan. This is investigated and put in plain words in next chapter.

NOTES

9. Ibid.


30. Lyonpo refer to recipients of the yellow scarf (ministers of the government), the Dasho is recipients of the red scarf awarded by the king, the Rabdey are spiritual heads in the hierarchical structure of religious organization.

31. It connotes the hereditary kingship of Bhutan.


Chapter Seven

Balancing Defense of Higher Universal Values and Interests

The Shift of India’s Approach to Democracy Promotion

India is considered to be the world’s largest democracy. Many elections and several democratic changes of government make India a political maverick in South Asia and globally. According to the theory of “democratic peace,” India, as the largest democracy in the world and as South Asia’s predominant regional power, should be expected to promote democracy in neighboring countries. Despite increasing calls from the United States and European governments, the promotion of democracy has not so far had a high priority in India’s foreign policy. Indian elites are concerned about losing their role as spokesmen for developing countries in global affairs, if the country abandons the principle of non-intervention in favor of democracy promotion. Thus, New Delhi lacks any official democracy promotion policy, and its past testimony on democracy in the region is mixed rejoinder at best.

Against this milieu, this chapter delves into the role India appears to play in Bhutan, asking whether this constitutes a departure from New Delhi’s traditional policy of non-interference in its neighbors’ internal affairs and a move toward a more assertive approach to democracy promotion. This chapter is also premeditated to examine how India can be a pivotal player in supporting “national reconciliation” between the king and liberal democratic forces in exile and inside Bhutan for introducing inclusive democracy and resolving the refugee crisis, which Bhutan has been undergoing since the 1990s. This chapter surveys the extent and limits of the political actors and what could be done by outside actors, primarily India, China, the United States, major European powers, and the European Union as a whole, to encourage a process leading to inclusive democratization. Taking this as foundation, the chapter presents expansively India’s role in Bhutan with the United States and China in the backdrop.

INDIA’S ATTITUDE TOWARD DEMOCRACY PROMOTION
Immanuel Kant’s treatise on *Perpetual Peace* has been cited as the pioneer of the most referred to the theory of *Democratic Peace*. It is the same theory that is being propagated as the defense for the recent discourse of international relations that “the democracies do not go to war.” According to the theory of “democratic peace,” India, as the largest democracy in the world and as South Asia’s powerful regional power, should be anticipated to promote democracy in neighboring countries. However, New Delhi lacks any official democracy promotion policy, and its past documentation on democracy in the region is incredulous. Man Mohan Singh, the former prime minister of India, in 2005 underlined the importance of Indian democracy to the world in following lexis: “If there is an ‘idea of India’ by which India should be defined, it is the idea of an inclusive, open, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual society... We have an obligation to history and mankind to show that pluralism works. ... Liberal democracy is the natural order of political organization in today’s world. All alternate systems, authoritarian and majoritarian in varying degrees, are an aberration.”

India’s democracy is based on the broad consensus at both elite and popular level. This consensus has contributed to India’s political stability, which has remained high compared to most other countries of the region. The Indian elites are extremely proud of India’s achievements as the most populous democracy in the world and as one of the most stable democracies among the post-colonial states. Former Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh has put it in following words: “India is proud of its democratic heritage, which is rooted in the country’s cultural ethos of tolerance, respect for different viewpoints and a ready embrace of diversity. Mahatma Gandhi led us into a non-violent struggle not only to free India from colonial rule but to also ensure to our people the exercise of their democratic rights.” The extremely high value attached to democracy by the Indian elite is underpinned by widespread support for democratic values among the broader population, as some surveys have revealed. This would induce us to assume that India has a strong propensity for promoting democracy in the region. However, this is not the case. The Indian policy-making elite is, in fact, extremely cautious when it comes to the issue of democracy promotion—so cautious that we can talk about a tabooization of this topic expressly in a country like Bhutan. When asked if New Delhi has created anything like a “democracy promotion” policy, one of the Indian government officials in informal conservation with this author replied with an indignant: “No, India will never do that!” Beyond the Ministry of External Affairs, this tabooization also reaches to
the academic field. The unwillingness to talk about Indian involvement in democratization across its borders has its roots in India’s tradition of non-alignment and its emphasis on the sovereignty and on non-involvement in other countries’ internal affairs.

This tendency has been reinforced by India’s more cooperative approach toward neighboring countries in South Asia, particularly by the present government of Modi. While former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi did not shy away from following a proactive policy of “military activism” and intervention in the neighborhood in the 1980s, the adoption of the Gujral Doctrine in the 1990s made non-reciprocity and non-interference the leading principles of India’s regional policy. Over the past few years, India’s policy makers have been trying to promote the vision of South Asia as an integrated region on the assumption that a prosperous and interconnected neighborhood can only contribute to predictability and stability in relations. Politically, India’s neighborhood policy is now based on the recognition that what can best secure India’s interests in the region would be building a web of “dense interdependency” with the neighbors. We must give our neighbors a stake in our own economic prosperity. This would impart certain stability in our relations.

The statements of Prime Minister Modi during his visits to Bhutan and Nepal in June and August 2014 loudly resonate this view. India has tried to convey the image of a benevolent hegemony that respects the sovereign decisions of neighboring states and refrains from intervening in their internal affairs. Knowing the fears of its smaller neighbors, India is well aware that South Asian countries would interpret an offensive policy of democracy promotion as a limitation of their sovereignty and an aggressive intrusion into their domestic affairs. The following reassuring statement by former Indian Foreign Minister and present President of India Shri Pranab Mukherjee, with its explicit rejection of democracy promotion as a policy, has to be seen in this context: “We do not believe in territorial expansion and neither do we believe in exporting ideology.” Former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran put it in more nuanced terms: “As a flourishing democracy, India would certainly welcome more democracy in our neighborhood, but that too is something that we may encourage and promote; it is not something that we can impose upon others.”

India’s multilateral policies related to democracy seem to disconfirm this assessment. In fact, in the context of New Delhi’s rapprochement with Washington, India joined several US-driven multilateral initiatives for democracy promotion. In 2000, US President Clinton persuaded India to serve
as one of the ten founding members of the Community of Democracies, which in 2004 established the Democracy Caucus at the United Nations with the aim of promoting democracy and human rights in the context of the United Nations. In 2005, moreover, India contributed ten million US dollars to the establishment of the UN Democracy Fund and agreed to take part in the so-called US-India Global Democracy Initiative. Despite its formal participation in these fora and initiatives, however, India’s commitment and activities within them have been limited. Cartwright and Wagner assert that the driving force behind this new readiness to engage in democracy—promotion rhetoric was India’s wish to improve its relations with the United States and to gain international recognition for its aspirations as an emerging power.\textsuperscript{10}

To summarize, despite India’s pride in its own democratic achievements and the firm belief in democracy that is widespread among the elite and the broader population, New Delhi has a highly critical attitude toward democracy promotion as it has been pursued, so far, by the “West”—with Western democracy promotion mainly equated, however, with US policies. In combination with India’s still deep-rooted tradition of non-alignment and with its more cooperative approach to the neighborhood since the adoption of the Gujral Doctrine, this critical attitude has led to a high degree of reluctance on the part of India to engage in democracy promotion activities.\textsuperscript{11} The lines of reasoning highlight that Indian’s approach to democracy promotion has been a mixed reaction mostly reflecting the deep conflict between values and interests. This thread of conflict between values and interests is extended and tested in the context of Bhutan in the subsequent section.

**India’s Ambiguous Support for Democracy Promotion in Bhutan**

India is a democratic country that could act as an important partner in democracy promotion in Bhutan. Medha Bisht remarks that: “India is considered a trusted friend and an ally in Bhutan. At present, there is no anti India lobby in the country and, given the geographical imperatives of Bhutan, India is likely to remain the most important partner in its foreign policy calculus in the coming years. Bhutan also leverages India’s role as its strategic partner.”\textsuperscript{12}

Despite escalating requests from the Bhutanese people and from the United States, the European governments, and international community, the promotion of democracy has not so far had a high priority in India’s foreign policy in Bhutan. Indian elites are concerned about losing their role as spokesmen for Bhutan in global affairs, if the country abandons the principle of non-
intervention in favor of democracy promotion. As links between India and Bhutan are closely related to problems of nation- and state-building, Indian foreign policy makers fear that active democracy promotion could weaken India’s position in Bhutan rather than strengthening it vis-a-vis China and other Western powers like the United States and Europeans.

Given India’s status as the world’s largest democracy and as it has a more globally oriented market economy, it has been facing growing expectations as a promoter of democracy in Bhutan. To strike a balance between the expectations of the Western community and its own domestic constraints and foreign policy norms, India has adopted a self-protective approach to the promotion of democracy in Bhutan. Despite India’s overall “traditional” rejection of democracy promotion, its engagement in the political reforms in Bhutan could lead us to believe that a small change in India’s attitude on this issue has taken place. For the past few years, it has also been involved in helping Bhutan forge royal democratic institutions. It has provided support to draft royal constitution, built the judicial building, given parliamentary training, and provided voting machines.

However, India has never lost sight of its national interest in Bhutan. Its economic aid, political and sociocultural interventions, and advice to Bhutan about reforms are not altruistic. Since democracy is the basis in the long run for stability and internal peace, it is in India’s interests to help in the protection or the establishment of an inclusive democratic system in Bhutan. In doing so, India has not been terribly aggressive in its approach. It has relied more on its own example than its powers of intervention and coercion. The strategic interaction between domestic actor and patron state has been surprisingly overlooked in the case of Bhutan. Much work has been done on how dissidents persuade the incumbent regime and the general public, and how patron pressure affects the incumbent’s willingness to liberalize. When confronted with the prospect of democratization in one of its dependent allies, Bhutan, a democratic patron, India faces a dilemma between an ideational preference for democracy promotion and national interests that favor client stability. Democracy confers domestic and international legitimacy. However, the patron depends on the client to provide alliance goods, such as natural resources, economic access, and security commitments. Since the essence of democracy is outcome of uncertainty, the client populace may elect a government that opposes providing the alliance goods or lacks the capacity to do so. This model cogently explicates the strategic interaction between Bhutan and India and India
supporting political reforms in Bhutan. This is coherently highlighted by Bisht in following words:

Instructive as this statement is about the keen interest in China to engage Bhutan; it also in many ways reveals the confidence and the readiness of the Chinese to settle the boundary dispute with Bhutan. . . . If China seeks to replace India, is Bhutan ready to be flooded with Chinese goods, more so when its industrial belt essentially lies in the South. . . . These are some tough questions which Bhutan’s policy makers will have to address. The question of Bhutan engaging China thus needs to be addressed at two levels. First, what will be the nature of a settled boundary dispute and is there a perceived middle way to resolve it? Second, what will be the nature and magnitude of Bhutan’s economic engagement with China and how this equation impact upon Bhutan’s interaction with India? Addressing these two questions and finding a balance are essential before anything definitive can be said about the inevitability of Bhutan China diplomatic relations. 17

Having said that, is India prepared to use its growing political, economic, sociocultural, diplomatic, and military capabilities in the service of inclusive liberal democracy in Bhutan in future?

**India’s Informal Engagement with Bhutanese Refugees, Dissidents, and Opposition Groups**

The idiosyncratic Buddhist kingdom proud of its Gross National Happiness cannot disguise the fact that more than one hundred thousand Lhotsampas and Sharchops were forced to leave their homes in Southern and Eastern Bhutan under government pressure almost two and half decades ago. Some of them have been languishing in refugee camps in Southeastern Nepal ever since for demanding democracy and human rights, while some are resettled in Western countries like the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia. The survey carried out by Bhutan Solidarity in 1996 revealed that more than forty thousand refugees are living in India (West Bengal, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh), and they have not been given the status of refugee by the UN High Commission for Refugees. In addition, there are around seven thousand Bhutanese refugees from the Eastern part of Bhutan in Arunachal Pradesh, and these groups of refugees are staying on their own. They were forced to leave Bhutan in late 1950s and early 1960s. They too are living in horrid conditions.18 As per the 1949 (revised February 2007) Friendship Treaty between India and Bhutan, the Government of India refused to give these people refugee status. The absence of any discourse or mention of the refugee issue in the Ministry of External Affairs joint statements or press briefings points to the reluctance of the Indian government in coming out publicly on the issue.19
India’s role in this regard is mystifying. They have supported the movement, and they have been very apprehensive about the whole issue. The question of why India would stand aloof and indifferent toward Bhutanese people’s aspirations for inclusive democracy and constitutional monarchy has become inscrutable since the early 1990s, when Thimphu began repressing Nepali-speaking Southern Bhutanese and hounding them away from Bhutan. India seemingly does not want to disturb the “ethno demographic balance.”

When the Bhutanese government forcefully expelled the Lhotshampas using brutal means, the Indian security forces allowed the refugees easy access to India’s territory. However, once they were inside the Indian territory, they did not allow the refugees to take refuge there, but herded them into trucks and dumped them at the Nepal border, violating the very basic principles of the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees and other international human rights laws. Such a transition and transfer of refugees continued for many years, starting in 1990, which clearly proves that India intentionally remained indifferent to the plight of those refugees, rather turning a blind eye, when the Bhutanese government launched crimes against humanity, and ignoring the very principles of democracy and human rights, such as right to culture, religion, identity, and life. Those who resisted were beaten up severely. With no choice left, they stayed in Nepal. Later, India laid its hands off from the issue. Whenever the Government of India was appealed to facilitate talks over the Bhutanese refugee issue, it raised its hands by saying that this was a bilateral issue between Nepal and Bhutan.

The refugees launched their struggle to return to their homeland by organizing activities to draw the attention of the international community, UN agencies, and other civil society organizations time and again. In the last week of May 2007, thousands of Bhutanese refugees organized a “symbolic long march” back to Bhutan to draw the attention of international communities and to put pressure on the Bhutanese government. However, this time India also played an unenthusiastic role and prohibited them at the Nepal-India border with hundreds of armed security forces. When the refugees tried to force into the blockade, the Indian security forces brutally attacked the peaceful march of the refugees, killing at least one and seriously injuring dozens of refugees on May 29, 2007.20 Not a word of compunction was articulated by the Indian authority after the incident took place. While the Indian government has welcomed the Tibetan refugees with open arms and allowed them to settle in India since 1959, it has taken an opposite stance in the case of the Bhutanese refugees.
India has different policies toward the anti-government activities in Nepal and Bhutan. While the Indian government generally allows the operation of anti-Nepal government movements and their leadership to operate in its land, maneuvering of any activities against the Bhutanese government by refugees in its land is immediately suppressed in India. Mishra observes that India’s attitude to Bhutan’s anti-establishment groups have remained diametrically opposite to its attitude toward Nepal’s anti-establishment groups. Nepal’s anti-establishment politics had only been able to succeed with the either covert or overt support of India. In contrast, any sign of political activities on Indian soil that might be harmful to Bhutan, whose foreign and defense policies are guided by Delhi under the 1949 treaty obligations, have been immediately quashed. This could be attributed to three major factors: Indians’ larger sentiment that Bhutan is under its security umbrella, Bhutan government’s absolute loyalty to India, and the West Bengal government’s negative perception toward Nepalese ethnic minorities because of the continuing gorkha movement for a separate “Gorkhaland State.” Hutt argues that:

India has changed neutral stance temporarily on three occasions in favor of the Bhutanese Government. First, when refugees arrived in India from Bhutan instead of either returning them to Bhutan, or allowing them to remain where they were, Indian security forces forced them to move onto Nepal. The second occasion is when the refugee launched a ‘peace march’ from the camps to Bhutan, in order to present an appeal to the king in person. Most of the marchers were arrested by Indian police soon after they crossed the Nepalese border, beaten brutally and eventually pushed back into Nepal. The third occasion arose in 1997, when the Bhutanese authorities asked New Delhi to arrange for the extradition from India of late Rongthong Kuenley Dorji, a leader of a Sharchop-led oppositional party, the Druk National Congress (DNC), established in 1994. The timely intervention of Indian human rights organizations prevented the extradition but India restricted his movement to please the king of Bhutan and has asked him to report regularly to the police authorities.

As discussed in chapter 2 of this book, since the establishment of a hereditary monarchy in Bhutan, India has hosted dissident leaders like Yangki, D. B. Gurung, Zhabdrung Rinpoche, as well as dealt with the Bhutan government. This is again a sign of India’s enormous influence on events in Bhutan and at times constructive informal role New Delhi played in Bhutanese politics. India, which had the multifaceted knowledge of the internal political dynamics of Bhutan, has yet failed to assess the Bhutanese people’s mood. This again highlights the ambiguity of India’s foreign policy. The future escalation of the situation in Bhutan would force India to make clear about its policy of informal support for democracy movement and simultaneous endorsement of the king and its autocratic politics. As highlighted by one of the experts interviewed, this dual approach to Bhutan was due to the divergent priorities of the different
stakeholders and ministries involved in shaping New Delhi’s Bhutan policy. For example, while the Ministry of Defense, with its long-standing relationship with the king and army, was committed to the institution of the monarchy, the Ministry of External Affairs lately came to realize that the dissidents needed to be given an appropriate political role but at the same time tried to micromanage and stabilize the internal situation in Bhutan as far as possible by maintaining good relations with the king. The shift has emerged mainly after China’s strong inroads into Bhutan due to Bhutan alleged flirting with its Northern neighbor.

The analysis shows that India’s involvement in Bhutan was the product of short-term geopolitics, trade, stability, security, and energy concerns rather than being an indicator of a long-term change in strategy with the intention of becoming an active player in democracy promotion in Bhutan. This is convincingly supported by the statement of former Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee on June 10, 2007, who stated that if “the refugees in Nepal get back to Bhutan, there will be a demographic imbalance in the region.” His statement may be an inkling of the “creation of continuous regional belt stretching from Nepal to India to Bhutan, mostly inhibited by people of Nepalese origin through Siliguri corridor.” However, the author sees a very remote possibility of such a Nepali-dominated belt in the region.

It is possible that the rise of Maoists and communist forces in Nepal could lead to a revamping of Nepal’s policy on refugees. For its part, the Government of India will have to balance carefully its political equations with Nepal on one hand and Bhutan on the other. Therefore, going back to the question of India’s potential transformation into a new democracy promoter, the Bhutanese case, when dissected in detail, reveals that New Delhi’s engagement was rather occasional and contingent, and that it originated from the precariousness of Bhutan’s situation. Seen together with India’s negative attitude toward democracy promotion as a policy and the primacy of its other foreign policy goals, this leads us to conclude that India has not become a major new actor in democracy promotion in Bhutan at this point of time. New Delhi’s approach to democracy promotion in the future is also likely to remain characterized by a high degree of restraint and by the primacy of pragmatism in dealing with regimes like in Bhutan. Now the question is why was New Delhi’s engagement rather sporadic and restrictive? The section below highlights the restrictions and constricting factors, which has enervated India’s leverages in Bhutan.

CONSTRAINTS ON INDIA’S LEVERAGES IN BHUTAN
The geostrategic importance of Bhutan as articulated by free India was a continuation of the perceptions of British India, which had concluded treaty arrangements with Bhutan in this regard. To meet India’s security concerns and those of Bhutan too, they signed the Indo-Bhutan Treaty in 1949 (revised February 2007), which has duly incorporated and secured Indian security interest.26 The treaty, considered the bedrock on which Indo-Bhutan relations are built, has clauses addressing both security and economic aspects.27

The current literature ties patron support for democratization to exogenous changes in the patron’s geopolitical and economic interests, which can alter the patron’s estimated value for democracy or the alliance goods. The patron-client relationship entails a principal-agent dynamic of mutual interdependence. As Bercovitch states, “Patron-client relations involve a special type of interaction between the two states of manifestly unequal resources linked together through joint interests or effective bonds to provide mutual services or common goals.”28

India’s Bhutan policy has not always been the outcome of rational choices. Although ensuring Bhutan’s political stability and economic well-being through the development of its hydropower potential and a smooth flow of trade has been India’s stated priority, its approach to Bhutan has largely been determined by its own security interests. The security interests have been defined in the context of evolving India-Bhutan relations and regional concerns, and, more broadly, in terms of preserving and consolidating India’s strategic space in Bhutan. India has been very sensitive to the strategic presence in Bhutan of extraregional powers like the United States and the European Union and of its known antagonists like China. The nitty-gritty of India’s interests and approach at any given point in time is shaped by the balance of forces among multiple stakeholders in India’s Bhutan policy. These stakeholders are diverse and varied, and their positions often mutually incompatible. Some are even beyond the reach of India’s Ministry of External Affairs. Prominent among these actors are the acknowledged political/administrative establishments (the home, finance, and commerce ministries; intelligence and national security organizations; and the prime minister’s office); the Indian Army; the business community; Gandhi family members and former princely kings; Indian political parties and their leaders, who maintain close institutional and personal relations with Bhutanese kings; the royal families; the interest groups; and finally, the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam bordering Bhutan. Though “Bhutan is India-locked as well as landlocked,” there are certain strategic considerations and critical factors
which constrain and limit India’s leverage on democracy promotion in Bhutan as delineated below.

Geopolitics

India’s reluctance to put serious pressure on Bhutan is due to strategic considerations, in particular its desire to counter the growing influence of China, whose financial and political support the government has been cultivating. China and Bhutan, linked by adjoining rivers and mountains as well as similar cultures, have maintained political engagement and witnessed steady growth of trade activities in recent years. The two neighbors have also deepened cross-cultural exchanges and understanding, and cooperated well in international affairs.

India’s own growing economic interests in Bhutan have also tempered its political activism. Geopolitical interests and security needs have been paramount. In the 1980s, India’s desire for regional hegemony produced interventions designed to weaken the Bhutan government and impose New Delhi’s preferred policies. More recently, its ambitions have required responding to the growing political and economic influence of China in Bhutan.

A few Bhutanese opinion makers in prominent newspapers and blogs have gone so far as to call for a rethink of their country’s “Look South” policy of dependence on India for all economic and military needs. They are arguing for Bhutan to move toward “equidistance” between India and China and have been emboldened by reports from China’s state-owned Global Times that the government of Jigme Thinley has made overtures toward Beijing.

Bhutan has tended to follow what the Scandinavian analyst Erling Bjol, while describing Finland’s relations with the former Soviet Union, had called the “pilot-fish behavior,” that is “keeping close to the shark to avoid being eaten.” Understandably, future Bhutan’s relationship with China may have a mathematical correlation with its ties with India. When the latter strengthens, the former will weaken, and vice versa. As Bhutan matures into an active international actor, as it is showing signs of doing, its leadership need to be aware of such axioms in the interplay of international relations.

The Increasing Chinese Footprints and Malevolent Shadow in Bhutan

There is a fear of China in Bhutan. There are unresolved border disputes going back centuries. Bhutan has traditional trade relations with Tibet, but Bhutan closed its Northern borders with China after an influx of Tibetan refugees in 1960. With that, the age-old cross-border trade came to a halt, and there have
been no official trade or business relations with China ever since. Lately, there are concerns of the Indian side increasing incursions of Bhutanese territory and efforts to engage Bhutan in various forays. On one hand, the Chinese are playing hardball on boundary issues with Bhutan; on the other hand, they are soft paddling the kingdom into its fold. As a counter to India’s strong relations with Bhutan, China is contributing to Bhutan’s modernization process. The undercurrents of suspicion between India and its smaller neighbors have to some extent facilitated the Chinese policy of expanding its footprint in South Asia. Various countries in the region have often used the so-called China Card to neutralize India’s dominance and perceived hegemony in the region. Although China acknowledges that South Asia is India’s rightful sphere of influence, it does not desist from seeking long-term relationships in the region.

Bhutan’s relations with its powerful neighbors have had a twist. Chinese forces are alleged to have intruded several times into Bhutanese territory at the tri-junction with India. The Chinese have made inroads in the strategically important area. The incursions into Bhutan are precariously close to India’s “chicken’s neck”—the vulnerable Siliguri Corridor, which links the Northeast passage. The Chinese move is a deliberate strategy to put pressure on India and strengthen China’s claims on disputed areas along the “line of actual control.” The Indian army has been alarmed at the increasing Chinese forays into Bhutan, which are also close to the strategic Chumbi Valley—another vital junction between India, Bhutan, and China. The intrusions of Chinese forces, analysts say, have more to do with India than Bhutan. Bhutan is vital to India’s security calculus not only vis-à-vis China, but also in tackling some of the Northeast insurgent groups. Bhutan’s position in the Chumbi Valley, the tri-junction with India and China, makes its border resolution decisions key from a security point of view for India.

Indian strategic analysts say that the Chumbi Valley is of geostrategic importance to China because of its shared borders with Tibet and Sikkim. Sources said Thimphu had clarified to New Delhi that they had not given any commitment to Beijing yet. But the Rio meeting of 2012 was not accidental since a special Chinese envoy had been sent to Thimphu many times for talks with the Bhutanese government.

Bhutan has four areas which are disputed in the Western sector: Doklam, Charithang, Sinchulumpa, and Dramana pasture land. As far as the disputed area of 495 square kilometers in Bayul Pasamlung is concerned, China had conceded
to Bhutan as part of a package deal, and their position in this area has been consistent since 1990.32

Bhutan’s boundary talks with China began in 1984. So far, twenty-two rounds of discussions have been held. The last discussions were held on July 2014 in China. Kuensel notes: “The [twenty-second] round of boundary talks with the government of the People’s Republic of China. . . . The boundary talks between the two nations are based on the Four Guiding Principles agreed to in 1988 and the 1998 agreement on the maintenance of peace and tranquility in the Bhutan-China border areas.”33 The Chinese team was in Thimphu from October 9 to 12, 2014, for the technical expert group meeting to endorse the report of joint technical field survey of Bayul Pasamlung and further discuss the other disputed areas with the Bhutanese counterparts.34

Bhutan-China interactions have not been confined to annual border consultations. There have been many bilateral exchanges and visits at various levels in recent decades. In 1998, Bhutan and China signed an “Agreement to Maintain Peace and Tranquility” on the Bhutan-China border, marking the first and only Sino-Bhutanese peace agreement on this day. The two governments had agreed to follow the five principles of mutual respect for each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.

After a surprise meeting between former Bhutanese Prime Minister Jigme Y. Thinley and former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao on the sidelines of the Rio+20 Summit in Brazil in 2012, the two countries reportedly discussed ways to resolve their border dispute. While Bhutan and China have had a long dialogue on the border dispute, India would be interested in the contours of any resolution as it would have huge implications for its strategic calculations in the region.35 It has also been reported that until 2010, the area of Bhutan was 46,500 square kilometers. However, Chinese intrusion resulted in seizure of 8,229 square kilometers from the Northern belt of Bhutan, downsizing the country’s area to 38,390 square kilometers.36 Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying was quoted in the media:

China and Bhutan, linked by adjoining rivers and mountains as well as similar cultures, have maintained political engagement and witnessed steady growth of trade activities in recent years. The two neighbors have also deepened cross-cultural exchange and understanding and cooperated well in international affairs. China appreciates Bhutan’s stance on the one-China policy and is willing to seek common prosperity with Bhutan.37
The China effect is now strangling Bhutan. It has coerced the Tobgay Government to declare a freeze in foreign relation expansion. The “diplomacy freeze” is the only way to elucidate to China the Bhutanese inability to further progressive talks in Sino-Bhutan affairs. In Bhutan, it is not prerogative of parliament to define the foreign policy and take decisions about establishing bilateral relations but of a powerful king.

Lorenzo notes that the monarchs also arguably possess a significantly larger ability to avoid blame in the eyes of the population than their civilian counterparts. It has been a common behavior for kings and emirs in the region to scapegoat elected politicians and ineffective administrations for their country’s ills, thereby avoiding their arguably deserved share of the blame. Nothing gets budged or transpires in Bhutan without the king’s concurrences and command. Jigme Thinley has become a scapegoat and a fall guy for both the king and India, just like Tek Nath Rizal in the 1990s. Also there is double standard for India as when the king and Jigme Thinley were courting with China. It is learned that India’s intelligence agency RAW has made a clandestine contact with exiled dissident leader Tek Nath Rizal for possible use, if the king and Thinley do not take Indian dictum seriously to reverse the whole process. The recent ever-increasing Chinese footprints in Bhutan have severely restricted Indian leverages in Bhutan.

**Bhutan’s Strategic Location and China’s Geopolitical Containment of India**

Historically, India has had a troubled relationship with China over territorial and other issues such as Tibet, conflicting worldviews, and strategic postures both during and after the Cold War. Since the resumption of high-level political exchanges between the two, regular diplomatic talks to settle outstanding issues and promotion of military exchanges to prevent conflict, the relationship has improved and stabilized. However, there has been little progress in resolving outstanding disputes, settling the issue of the Dalai Lama, Tibetan refugees in India, or removing Indian insecurities regarding China’s posture and defense ties in the region. On the contrary, China is concentrating on increasing its power and influence and leveraging the strategic configuration of power to its advantage in South Asia. China’s attempt at forging strong economic and military relationships with surrounding countries and entering into defense ties, cooperation, the sale of military equipment, and collusive relationships are integral components of the above policy. However, there is no getting away from
the fact that it also amounts to a virtual encircling of India, in what is called the “string-of-pearls” construct. By doing so, it is attempting to gain geopolitical supremacy in South Asia. China has devised new means and a subtle approach recently to make itself a dominant factor in the security environment of the region. It is in this context that China’s emerging relationships with Bhutan has to be taken. It must be admitted that the present Sino-Bhutan relations transcend hawkish eyes in China on Bhutanese territories, or even the People’s Liberation Army’s aggressive incursions resulting in discomfort for the Royal Bhutan Army.39

After the royal opening up of the kingdom and two successive state-controlled general elections, a new electorate comprised mostly of educated middle class has emerged in Bhutan, which has been showing all kinds of restlessness to come out of Indian tutelage. They are not satisfied with the mere revision of the 1949 Indo-Bhutan Treaty in 2007, but expect an independent domestic and foreign policy for their country. Jigme Thinley’s attempt to forge a diplomatic relation with China should be viewed in this context. The pressure groups are working within Bhutan to divert the course of its journey toward China. A case in point was the Bhutan Post Corporation Limited’s decision in 2012 to purchase Chinese public transport vehicles, instead of the long-standing practice of buying India-made vehicles, through an agency named Global Traders and Gangjung owned by the son-in-law of the former Prime Minister Jigme Thinley.

China has tried to expand its ties with Bhutan and in the past even sought to undermine India’s special relations with them. Beijing’s new policy aimed at securing global leadership for China. The new policy strives to strike a balance between the defense of national sovereignty and the maintenance of regional stability. It simultaneously stresses that efforts will be made for better political and economic relations with neighboring countries, closer security cooperation, and people-to-people contact.40

Lately, it is also trying to get engaged with Bhutan through border negotiations and by indirectly encouraging Bhutan to establish diplomatic relations before signing any border agreements. China is keen to promote its relations with Bhutan to gain politicomilitary leverage. Fu Ying, the vice foreign minister of China, notes: “China respects the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bhutan. . . . It is time for China and Bhutan to build bridges of friendship and cooperation.”41

From India’s perspective, its own security required stability in the entire Himalayan neighborhood comprising Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and its
Northeastern states. India being in a defensive position vis-à-vis China on the Himalayan states does not want that the area within its strategic interest falls under the influences of foreign powers. Bhutan has to consider the reality of China even as geopolitical and geoeconomic realities ensure that India will continue to be one of the most critical elements in Bhutan’s foreign relations. In the view of an observer of Bhutan, Brassard states: “the keen interest of the current young King in politics and international relations, and his outward outlook, are likely to influence a positive attitude towards China, albeit in a manner that is cautiously cultivated.”

Clearly, it will be a challenge for Bhutan to maintain friendly relations with China without undermining its own relations with India. Located in the geostrategically sensitive Himalayan region bordering Tibet and China, Bhutan is a key part of India’s periphery and well within Delhi’s influence. The shared open border, interconnected populations, and common waterways leave India very sensitive to domestic Bhutanese political and socioeconomic changes.

India has been deeply involved in Bhutanese affairs ever since independence in 1947, encountering support and resistance from different quarters. This security-oriented perception has since heavily characterized Indian regional policy, and Delhi has sought deep relations with Himalayan governments to build influence and security arrangements. This has been achieved comprehensively with Bhutan, and Sikkim was fully absorbed into the Indian federation in 1975, heightening Bhutan’s concerns for their own independence. The recent visit of Indian Prime Minster Modi (June 15 and 16, 2014) and deliberations with the king and prime minister of Bhutan is in line with its typically security-oriented regional policy. Delhi has consistently chosen to support king and royal political actors, which it calculated likely to have a stabilizing effect within Bhutan, be cooperative with Indian strategic interests, and minimize external involvement. Delhi does not want to lose its huge influence vis-à-vis China in support for democracy promotion in Bhutan.

The Increasing US and European Union Engagements in Bhutan

Bhutan’s strategic location makes it natural for external powers to take interest in its domestic as well as foreign policy. Today, Bhutan is witnessing an increasing interest of the United States in Bhutan. The report of Madsen in “Obama’s Asia Pivot: The Himalayan Angle” states that:

The Obama administration’s Asia pivot is playing out in earnest in joint U.S.-Indian-Israeli intelligence operations in the Himalayan region. The actions by the three cooperative nations’ intelligence agencies
are aimed at limiting Chinese influence here. The strategy in the mountainous area of the Sino-Indian border complements other U.S. strategies now being played out in the East China Sea, the Yellow Sea, the South China Sea, the South Pacific, and the Indian Ocean to box in China and prevent it from challenging America’s military presence in the Asia-Pacific region. . . . The most recent covert operation in the encirclement of China played out in the recent election in the Buddhist Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan. Under its previous government, led by the first democratically-elected Prime Minister, Jigmi Y. Thinley, Bhutan championed the concept of Gross National Happiness, which measured the progress of a nation based on the happiness and well-being of its people rather than by cold economic figures and statistics. Thinley traveled to the UN General Assembly in 2012 to urge the world’s nations to adopt Gross National Happiness as a principal in running their economies.43

The United States, along with other core countries, has accepted resettlement of the bulk of Bhutanese refugees sheltered in the UN High Commissioner for Refugees camps in Nepal for more than two decades. The United States has accepted these refugees to resettle not only on humanitarian raison d’être but keeping the long-term political and geostrategic interests in Bhutan. It is very critical to think why the United States intervenes in the Bhutanese refugee issue and has taken a lead in resettling in the West instead of being the advocate of democracy for the establishment of multiparty democracy in Bhutan and the repatriation of Bhutanese refugees to Bhutan.44

The European Union does not want Bhutan to be another Sikkim or Tibet. So their perspective of looking at Bhutan is different from that of the United States. They want Bhutan to be free from any malevolent shadow of China and India, which they see in case of Sikkim and Tibet in the past. Their present strategies and policy in Nepal pragmatically supports this claim.45 Western powers want to keep some kind of a foothold between two Asian giants (India and China), and they take up interventionist roles. As a result, Bhutan appears to be in a triangular contention. If Bhutan wants to maintain national sovereignty in the future, it should be capable of moving forward and manage this emerging triangular contention.

Today, the United States and other Western powers are supporting the government of Bhutan. In future, India has to confront the United States, China, Japan, and the European Union in Bhutan. This illustrates the failure of the India foreign policy and the shift of India’s new regional policy as well as weakening it leverages in Bhutan for pressuring the king to introduce inclusive democracy.

**Bhutan Diversifying Its Partners**

Since independence, Bhutan, like most of India’s neighbors, has understood the importance of its relationship with India, but, at the same time, has been wary of New Delhi’s paternalistic tendencies in the region. Bhutan has often sought to
balance the relationship by reaching out to India’s adversaries in the 1980s as eloquently demonstrated by Bhutan’s foreign policy of the 1970s and 1980s. While the strategy produced some short-term gains in the past, it ultimately drew New Delhi’s fire and Bhutan returned to India’s orbit, particularly after the 1990s political crisis in the South and East of Bhutan. However, today with resettlement of refugees in the western countries, Bhutan has more options when it comes to economic, military, and political assistance. Global shifts in economic and political power have also allowed Bhutan not only to play China off against India but also to turn to others for support. Madsen in “Obama’s Asia Pivot: The Himalayan Angle” notes:

Thinley committed an unforgivable sin in New Delhi’s eyes by exerting a degree of foreign policy independence from India by opening up direct talks with China and considering establishing diplomatic relations with Russia and other nations. Thinley had already established diplomatic ties with [thirty-two] nations, a move that caused distress in New Delhi. . . . Plans were put into motion to dump Thinley in the scheduled Bhutanese election and replace him with someone with more pro-India and anti-China credentials.46

To counter such a threat, India would obviously use Bhutanese groups and organizations in exile, if its interest and space is jeopardized by the Bhutanese king or government or any external forces and powers. Madsen further notes:

The pro-Indian candidate for Prime Minister, Tshering Tobgay of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), trounced Thinley’s Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) party in the election, winning [thirty-two] of [forty-seven] parliamentary seats. Tobgay’s first action was to stop Bhutan’s outreach to other countries like China and Russia, and pledge total loyalty to India. That course also pleased Washington, which could devote its resources to other flash points on China’s borders and not worry about Bhutan.47

In a comparative perspective, to regain the lost political space, the same policy has been emulated in Sri Lanka, where Rajapakse, the pro-Chinese president, has been defeated by political party close to India and West in recent election. Given its new friends, Thimphu would rely less on India and Western donors for its development and security assistance in the future. China’s vast resources, its desire to guarantee itself access to the world’s principal oil shipping lanes, its veto power on the UN Security Council, its professed emphasis on non-interference, and its aversion to holding others to account on human rights and governance issues may attract Bhutan toward China. A two-time former union minister described it as a sign of the government’s inability to rein in and reform a “sclerotic and corrupt bureaucracy,” while a retired senior commander saw it as a result of a failure to create a single mechanism to supervise a cross-cutting government security and economic strategy, as well as its execution. Beijing has also made significant investments in all of India’s neighboring countries, which
many in the conservative Indian political and security establishment view as tantamount to undermining India’s sovereignty itself.

In recent years, India has also sought to deepen its relationship with Bhutan with a view to countering the influence of China and various Western countries. In the process, it has tried to micromanage internal politics of Bhutan and ensure that the political leadership or any change does not hamper its interests. New Delhi was alarmed not just by Thinley, who made himself the official ambassador of Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness phenomenon, reaching out to Beijing but also the manner in which he established diplomatic ties with many other countries without bothering to take South Block into confidence. The bigger message India must send out is that it is not insecure about China swamping Bhutan, and that it wants a Bhutan standing on its own feet. The old paternalistic model of New Delhi–Thimphu relations is not suited to the new democratic spirit that is enveloping Bhutan. India needs to help Bhutan redefine its sovereignty in a way that propels Bhutanese self-sufficiency and at same time, it remains loyal to Indian interests in Bhutan.

**Energy Cooperation**

India’s foray in harnessing hydropower from Bhutan has been free from any controversies, unlike in Nepal. India and Bhutan have signed an agreement focusing exclusively on hydropower development. So far India has built some 1,488 megawatts of generation capacity in Bhutan. Bhutan’s electricity has started air conditioning the offices in New Delhi, and it is in the process of expanding the electricity supply to other political power and business centers, for example, Kolkata, Mumbai, and Chennai. In addition, Bhutan has no complaint about the use of stored water, displaced populations due to dams in Bhutan, or about the concerns of other lower riparian Indian states. As long as the hydroelectricity revenue fills the coffer of the royal government, as long as the king and royal coterie get free hand to use newly acquired wealth from hydropower development, there will be hardly any nuisance for India from Bhutan. For developing ten thousand megawatts of power from Bhutan by 2020, ten hydropower projects have been agreed during the first Empowered Joint Group meeting held in Delhi in March 2009. The thrust of the first visit of the prime minister of Bhutan in 2013 was primarily security and economic. India has agreed to provide assistance to Bhutan in developing the hydropower sector and to purchase at least ten thousand megawatts of power from Bhutan by 2020. However, anti-Indian Bhutanese group alleges that Bhutan is under the
“electricity-colonization” of India. They assert that “what one may put in, in reality, under the guise of friendship, knowing the geopolitical reality of Bhutan, India for her own interest has manage to squeeze undue benefits from the hydropower cooperation with Bhutan.” It’s commonsensical to simply understand why Bhutan’s hydroelectricity is destined to service India. The billions of ngultrum that are pumped into for construction of hydropower projects in the country are almost all drained off to India as everything is provided by India. The contractors, consultants, professionals, management of projects, technology, and products are India-tied, and India takes the lion’s share of benefits during the construction stage. There’s little Bhutan could gain during the construction phase. In a relative view, a simple analysis would show that the annual turnover rate with respect to investment for Tala Hydropower Plant is 21.23 percent, whereas it’s 55.55 percent in case of Dungsam Cement Plant. Tala Hydroelectric Power Plant, constructed at the cost of Nu. 41.26 billion with an annual generation capacity of 4,865 GWh electricity, fetches an annual gross revenue of about Nu. 8.76 billion at a tariff rate of Nu. 1.8 per kWh. However, the Dungsum Cement Plant, constructed at the cost of Nu. 10.8 billion, is projected to earn an annual gross revenue of Nu. 6 billion.

It may be coincidental or a befitting response to the skeptical Bhutanese anti-Indian groups; the Indian government showed a lack of interest to finance the projects, proposed to be built on an intergovernmental model, because of cost factors during the Empowered Joint Group meeting held in Delhi, India, on September 18, 2014. The Indian government had declined to finance the 2,640 MW Kuri-Gongri, the 2,560 MW Sankosh, and the 540 MW Amochu projects, which are planned in the 2020 vision. The Indian government has also declined to finance the projects due to security reasons as catchments areas of some the projects lies close to Cherithang, Dolam, and Sinchulam in the North, bordering China. Kuensel notes that, “The Indian government also expressed security concerns on the Amochu project as it was close to India’s tri-junction. The catchments of Amochu are spread across Cherithang, Dolam and Sinchulam in the north, bordering China.” This connotes that going by the present trend of hydropower building and the kind of progress made, the country will be able to achieve only 3,540 MW by 2020.

On the optimistic side, hydropower cooperation forms the enduring good story in India-Bhutan relations. The cascading rivers of Bhutan, with a combined hydropower potential of thirty-five thousand megawatts, have offered a sturdy bridge to crystallize this unique partnership of co-prosperity, with power
generated in Himalayan mountains and valleys lighting up countless homes in Bihar, West Bengal, and Delhi. India has pledged at least in paper to buy ten thousand megawatts by 2020, making Bhutan perhaps the only country in South Asia, which enjoys trade surplus with New Delhi. Thus, it is India’s energy compulsion to bury under the carpet all humanitarian concerns, including the issue of Bhutanese refugees and democracy for energy, which is very much needed by India to address the power shortage.54

Security Cooperation

According to India’s strategic view, Bhutan falls under its security umbrella, and prime ministers since Jawaharlal Nehru’s time have been very vocal about it. Nehru declared in the Indian parliament in November 1959 that “any aggression against Bhutan would be regarded as an aggression against India.” Indian military and paramilitary forces have their bases in Bhutan since 1960 and in some ways both internal and external doings of Bhutan have been directly or indirectly influenced or affected by India. Today, India trains Bhutan’s security forces and funds a large part of its military budget. Apart from the economic dimension, India still trains the Bhutanese army through the Indian Military Training Team.55 India also equips the Bhutanese military and maintains a military training mission.56

The synergies of this cooperation became clearly visible in the 2003 “Operation All Clear” in which a previously completely untested Royal Bhutanese Army was able to flush out the United Liberation Front of Assam, National Democratic Front of Bodoland, and Kamatapur Liberation Organisation Indian militants from their camps situated in Southern Bhutan, with India providing logistics, transportation, and intelligence. While the operation was an astonishing success for Bhutanese security forces, the threat to both India and Bhutan emanating from the insurgents did not disappear. Since 2003, security forces of both countries have been working closely and stepping up their efforts to secure the Indo-Bhutanese border more effectively in an attempt to deny the militants to regroup in Bhutan. In 2004, the Sashastra Seema Bal was officially tasked with securing the Indo-Bhutanese border in Sikkim, West Bengal, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh, setting up 130 border outposts to prevent infiltration. Bhutan, for its part, took stern action against those suspected of aiding the militants, sentencing more than one hundred people to prison in 2004. It appears as if a regrouping of Indian militants in the vast forests of Bhutan’s Southern districts could be prevented so far, although every once in a while reports claim
that United Liberation Front of Assam, National Democratic Front of Bodoland, and Kamatapur Liberation Organisation have set up new camps in Bhutan. The royal government vehemently rejects such claims. However, such assertions cannot be refuted wholly taking Bhutan’s past record of sheltering these insurgents in 1990s. The *Times of India* (March 7, 2015) notes: “While the outfit’s chairman, IK Songbijit, is suspected to have fled to Myanmar, his close associate G Bidai and other top leaders are believed to be in Bhutan. Top [National Democratic Front of Bodoland] militant leaders started fleeing the country after an extensive military operation was launched soon after the rebel group gunned down about [sixty-six] Adivasis in Kokrajhar and Sonitpur districts of Assam in December last year. Sources said Bidai, the mastermind of last year’s massacre by the outfit, was last seen somewhere near Thimphu in Bhutan.”

However, as a matter of fact, insurgents are at least crossing the border into Bhutan from time to time, which becomes evident from increasing reports of militants attacking, kidnapping, and robbing Bhutanese houses, especially in Sarpang district.

Though there is no imminent danger from insurgents, apart from sporadic kidnappings, other developments connected with these groups are threatening Bhutan’s national security. Reports indicate that there exists a cross-border nexus between Indian insurgent groups and anti-national outfits in Bhutan and Nepal. The United Liberation Front of Assam and Bodo militants have established ties to organizations like the Communist Party of Bhutan, Bhutan United Democratic Socialist Party, the Bhutan Tiger Force, and the Revolutionary Youth of Bhutan, providing them with training and weapons. Especially, the Communist Party of Bhutan and Bhutan United Democratic Socialist Party have been active in Bhutan during recent years, being responsible for numerous attacks on Bhutanese soil. There is close interdependence and linkages of the security interests between Bhutan and India. This will inevitably compel India to ignore the despotic orientation of the regime in Bhutan.

**Indian Community and Employment in Bhutan**

Bhutan is a labor deficit country and has to depend on India for its requirement of semi-skilled and unskilled labor especially in mining, agro-based industries, and hydropower projects. This traditional dependence on Indian labor has cultural, economic, and political implications on Indo-Bhutan relations. The dependence on Indian laborers began soon after economic modernization plans began with the assistance of the Government of India in 1960/1961. Works on
the first road connecting Phuntsholing near the Indian border in Southern Bhutan to Thimphu and Paro began in January 1960. In fifteen months, ten thousand people working at one time constructed 145 kilometers of road. Public road maintenance was entrusted mainly to Project Dantak, undertaken by the General Reserve Engineering Force, an organization of the Indian Border Roads Organization. These two organizations have retained many Indian laborers on Bhutanese roads, and even today, Dantak recruits its laborers directly without having to consult with the Division of Immigration; it only submits a monthly report. At any given time, Dantak has today, on average, two thousand Indian laborers working on roads in different parts of Bhutan. The number of these laborers would have been more were it not for the establishment of a National Work Force in the latter half of the 1980s, when internally displaced and landless Bhutanese from the South and East were recruited to work on roads and other government construction sites. The construction of major hydropower projects, beginning with the Chukha Hydro Power Corporation, brought about a significant increase in the number of Indian laborers in Bhutan. The construction of Punachu and Kurichhu Power Project employed hundreds of Indians in various capacities. The project encompasses several Indian agencies such as National Hydroelectric Power Corporation Ltd., Water and Power Consultancy Services, and Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd. The number of Indians in 2014 was much higher since most of the agencies were active during these years with construction activities at their peak. While the influx of Indian contractors has also been raised as a cause of concern, it perhaps needs to be reiterated that intervention to rectify such policies need to be initiated within Bhutan. Today, more than seventy thousand expatriate workers from India are working in Bhutan in various private and government projects, as well as in the hydropower projects. This excludes day workers which number around five thousand with annual remittances to around seven to ten billion. The Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan notes on rupees outflow: A substantial wage bill leaves the country. Bhutan, on an average, pays about Indian Currency seven billion a year as wages to about seventy-five thousand to eighty thousand foreign workers. The amount of Indian Currency seven billion is an estimate, based on a study done by the labor ministry, to check on the rupee outflow in the form of wages to foreign workers. The labor secretary said that, according to their preliminary estimate, 120,000 new job seekers are expected to enter the workforce in the eleventh plan (2013–2018). This also reflects the Indian interests in Bhutan and its constraints on leverage on Bhutan for inclusive political reforms.
China has been a key factor in determining India’s strategic planning particularly from the days of the British Raj in India. The British devised forming a ring of friendly states (Nepal, Bhutan, Burma, Tibet, and Afghanistan) around India for protection from the imperial power in China. After independence, it became an outdated and impractical concept, especially in the wake of China’s military might, as evidenced in people’s war (1949) and takeover of Tibet in (1959). Finally, the 1962 India-China war pitted two Asian giants against each other, killing eventually the concept of garland states. According to Brahma Chellany, a prominent Indian analyst, “India has ceded strategic space in its regional backyard in such a manner that Bhutan now remains its sole pocket of influence. In Sri Lanka, India has allowed itself to become a marginal player despite its geostrategic advantage and trade and investment clout.”

India has always thought that its cultural links with other countries in the region would ensure its role as the preeminent external influence. This is an utterly naïve thought and something the Sri Lankans proved a myth.

In this backdrop, the geographical location of Bhutan, sandwiched between India and China, assumes greater significance. After the Bhutanese refugee crisis in the 1990s, Bhutan has time and again informed India that China has expressed its interest to establish a diplomatic enclave in Thimphu. It is clear that such a move by the Bhutanese king was to silence India’s voice in support of human rights and democracy in Bhutan and on the issue of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. There have been other developments too. Overlooking the provision enshrined in the 1949 treaty, Bhutan signed a Peace and Friendship Treaty with China in 1998, making the case for resettlement of its boundary dispute. Under this agreed formula, Bhutan would hand over some ten thousand square kilometers of its territory to China. This has caused heartburn in Indian security establishments as the land to be handed over to China in Bhutan rests in the inverted triangular area at Sikkim-Bhutan-China tri-junction, just above the Chicken’s Neck in Siliguri.

India-Bhutan relations are intertwined with many complex issues, which are inherited from the time of the colonial period. The theory of buffer states between China and India has become as thin as a piece of paper, and India is in no mood to compromise its security on humanitarian concerns. On its part, India has done everything to keep Bhutan under its fold, and it considers now economic integration is the appropriate mechanism.
Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit in 2014 has sent a strong message that Indo-Bhutan relations have been carried on in the right spirit. Despite off-and-on hiccups in the bilateral relationship, there has been no dearth of attempts from the Indian side to stand by Bhutan. Undoubtedly, the sufferings of Bhutanese refugees have pained all Indians, including those in leadership positions. However, the Bhutanese refugee community should recognize that there are limitations to what India can do. They must be realistic in expectations from India in the realm of complex geopolitical environment in the subcontinent.

**DOES NEW DELHI RELINQUISH PRINCIPLE IN FAVOR OF POLITICAL INTERESTS IN BHUTAN?**

In the Nehruvian era, the ideology was adjusted with political realism. India during this period did not join any international effort in promoting and strengthening democracy as a desirable political system in any country and in fact meticulously avoided making the cause of promoting democracy in the world as an integral part of its foreign policy. Nehru’s successors, particularly Indira Gandhi, where realism occupied the front seat, made compromises on democracy—both on the domestic front by imposing the emergency and at the external front while pursuing India’s vital strategic interest in the neighborhood. The third phase is the imperatives of the new millennium, where an initiative with regard to India’s shift to the democratic dimension in its foreign policy was made by the Bharatiya Janata Party–led National Democratic Alliance government, when it signed the Community of Democracy Charter. In the new millennium, the urge to enhance India’s strategic proximity to the United States and a perusal of the global goal of democracy in foreign policy has cut across the political divide between the two formations that came to power in the last decade, that is, the National Democratic Alliance and United Progressive Alliance.

It is important, though, to set the record straight on India’s democracy promotion efforts over the last six and half decades. India has done more than the majority in the Western world cherishes. New Delhi has been most active in its region. In the 1950s, it offered Burma aid in dealing with communist insurgents, who threatened the democratic government of the day in Rangoon. It also helped usher in a more open system in Nepal, even though that did not amount to democracy in the fullest sense. In the late 1960s, it helped the Sri Lankan government deal with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna ultranationalist...
rebellion against the duly constituted democratic government of the day. In 1971, it supported the East Bengali rebellion against the Pakistani government and eventually intervened with its own military to create Bangladesh. Also, in the 1970s, it sided with Sikkimese dissidents to oust the hereditary ruler of Sikkim and bring the protectorate into the Indian republic. In the 1980s, it sent the Indian Army into Sri Lanka to help broker the peace in the conflict between Tamils and the national government. In 1988, it intervened to prevent the overthrow of the Maldivian government which, though not democratic altogether. Under Rajiv Gandhi’s leadership in the mid-1980s, it used an economic blockade to bring back democracy in Nepal, and it criticized military rule in Burma.

The question of democracy took a back seat during the later reign of Rajiv Gandhi, when the brutal oppression of Tibet was overlooked in order to mend estranged relations with China. P. V. Narasimha Rao turned India’s traditional support for the democratic forces in Burma upside down. Citing security and strategic reasons, he made up with the “military junta,” which had refused to transfer power to Suu Kyi, despite the National League for Democracy winning majority of the seats in the 1990 elections.

More recently, in 2006, India worked with the United States and the United Kingdom to abolish the 240-year-old monarchy and establish a fragile republic in Nepal. It collaborated with Bhutan in its transition from monarchical rule to semi-authoritarianism democracy doubles in 2008. For the past fifteen years, it has also been involved in helping Afghanistan forge democratic institutions. It has built the parliamentary building, given parliamentary training to Afghan legislators, and provided voting machines. It has also pledged billions of dollars in foreign aid to Afghanistan in the fight against Islamic extremism. However, India has never lost sight of its national interest in South Asia. Its economic aid, political and military interventions, and advice to its neighbors and to Bhutan about democracy are not selfless. Since even the vestige of freedom and democracy is the basis in the long run for stability and internal peace, it is in India’s interests to help in the establishment of inclusive democracy in Bhutan. In doing so, India has not been terribly aggressive in its approach. It has relied more on its own example than its powers of intervention and coercion. Has this been successful in Bhutan? Conceivably not.

India has promoted democracy in other regions in different ways. It has been the single largest contributor of peacekeeping troops around the world, often in the service of democracy. It has sent out scores of its civil servants and election
officials as advisors and observers in aid of other people’s elections. It has worked in the Commonwealth to condemn the actions of non-democratic members such as Fiji, Zimbabwe, and, from time to time, Pakistan. It has helped Fiji with the reform of its electoral system.

India has also invested some money and time in international efforts at democracy promotion. It is a founding member of the UN Democracy Fund and its ten million dollar contribution to the fund was behind only the United States and Japan. It is a member of the Community of Democracies promoted by the United States in 2000. In July 2005, New Delhi agreed to join Washington in the US-India Global Democracy Initiative. Its participation in these three international efforts has admittedly been rather tepid, but the fact that India was willing to be associated with them gesticulates a change in its thinking, except some episodes in neighboring countries, which presents a different picture.

For instance, it is ironic to note that during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the struggle for democracy in Nepal took the form of people’s uprising—popularly called “Jan Andolan”—which led to the abolition of the Panchayat system, the Indian government showed a very confusing approach. The contrasting position of the Government of India and the political forces represented by it an anti-Panchayat and pro-multiparty democratic movement was visible with the government negotiating trade relations with the king’s representative and both the Congress and Janata Party activists blocking the flow of goods on the Indo-Nepal border. Also during the 2006 popular movement against dismissal of the Nepalese parliament by King Gyanendra, the Indian leadership, instead of calling for restoration of Nepalese democracy, selected and sent an ex-royal member of the ruling Congress party, Karan Singh, to Kathmandu to broker peace. In another instance, when thousands of Buddhist monks marched peacefully in the streets of Burma, the Indian leadership chose to remain silent. A number of protests were also organized in New Delhi in support of the Burmese monks, but India’s ruling politicians stayed away. The same was the case with the Bhutanese democratic movement. They have been struggling for the past twenty-five years in exile to introduce inclusive democracy, but the Indian government position was a mixed response. At the beginning, they supported the movement, but later on, they withdrew the support to refugees and dissidents, and then supported the monarchy all the way to introduce semi-authoritarian democracy doubles in 2008. India firmly stood with the monarchy when there were problems in Southern and Eastern Bhutan demanding democracy and human rights—a classic testimony of relegating
democratic principles for state security. India munificently rewarded the monarchy for ensuring security and keeping its alliance intact with India vis-à-vis China by not intervening in bilateral talks between Nepal and Bhutan on repatriation of Bhutanese refugees from Nepal. In return, it could garner a full pledge on security issues as well successfully harness some of Bhutanese rivers for energy. The monarchy cozily cooperated and conceded to Indian demands for its own survival with the fear that it may support the democracy movement like one in Nepal, where a 240-year-old institution of monarchy was abolished in 2008. India lent a hand to introduce semi-authoritarian democracy’s doubles in Bhutan in 2008 without diluting the power of monarchy as India thought that monarchy was the sole cushion of traditional security interest in Bhutan.

In Bhutan, it should encourage democracy by espousing the opposition in exile to reconcile with monarchy/royalists rather than depending solely on the monarchy for its security need in the future. China and the United States/Europe will be the main competitors in Bhutan in changing the post–Cold War context in future. This is persuasively demonstrated by the resettlement of Bhutanese refugees in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia. The textbook example of Nepal should be the realization for India to do whatever is needed to change the political dynamics in Bhutan from long-term security threats from China. Monarchy in Bhutan may revive its foreign policy of the 1970s and 1980s to perceive India as a hegemony and emulate the same strategies to use the “China Card” against India in the future once the refugee imbroglio is absolutely resolved and the Chinese embassy is established in Bhutan. However, India’s silence was disappointing to both the Indian people and to the outside world. India is now an emerging power, and there are growing expectations worldwide for New Delhi to play a consequential role in international fora. An example of how expectations from India have grown was evident recently when the Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas, called for India to be invited to the Middle East peace conference being sponsored by the United States.

There are two noticeable trends in terms of the thinking that drives India’s foreign policy: it adopts what can be described as a “Gandhian” approach to international relations whenever it interacts with the West, the United States, Britain, and the European Union, whereas it opts for a pragmatic approach when it deals with regimes in the neighborhood. Bhutan, Nepal, and Burma are three instantaneous examples. Both the approaches are designed to work for the national interests of India. When adopting the former approach, Indian foreign policymakers speak of justice, equality, and parity in international relations,
obvious as in example of the global trade talks with the European Union and the United States. In the case of the latter, Indian policy makers emasculates all these values in the name of real politik, as apparent in its recent responses in the cases of Bhutan, Nepal, and Burma. In the cases of Bhutan, Nepal, and Burma, India has been brought out by a strong Chinese presence and has to deal with constraints deliberated above. When the Bhutanese led the protests in different period of time, the world expected India to do more than simply remain silent. The international community, mainly the United States, Britain, and the European Union, reacted promptly by urging the Bhutanese government not to act against the refugees and dissidents to bring about a democratic change. However, the Bhutanese kings do not have a serious stake with the external actors and are unlikely to listen to the international community. They have a political, security, and economic stake with India and therefore are more likely to be influenced by India only. This lack of coherent foreign policy response from New Delhi on an international issue of vital interest throws light on Indian diplomats’ confused understanding of India’s role and position in Bhutan and in fast-changing world affairs.

It is inconsistent to take note of Indian position on democracy in Bhutan and Nepal. It supported the abolition of monarchy to bring about a fragile and capricious republic in Nepal, and on the contrary defended the diehard monarch in Bhutan by helping to institute semi-authoritarian democracy doubles. The same regime in Bhutan has ethnically cleansed one-sixth of the population and has disfranchised and denationalized another one hundred thousand Bhutanese nationals inside the country. These two cases of Himalayan nations are candid illustrations of Indian foreign policy specialists’ lack of clarity of India’s growing weight in international relations and concomitant expectations from the international community. A choice for India is not to forgo either of the two approaches conversed above, nor even to prioritize one above the other. A clear framework would be a combination of the two approaches: supporting humanity’s ideals of democracy and justice, and achieving them through considerations of pragmatism. The biggest strength of India as a nation has been that it has remained a vibrant democracy and a free society. History is replete with instances of how democracies are more reliable than autocracies, oligarchies, and military dictatorships.

India will take a long time to resolve the fundamental dilemmas of when and where to intervene in defense of higher universal values. Even the world’s most powerful nation ever, the United States, has found it difficult to answer these
questions. As the United States recoils from the failed intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, democracy promotion could well become a less salient objective in its deepening relationship with India. The good news is that India, which will soon have the capacity to influence regions other than its own, has begun to wrestle with these questions. It is equally refreshing that New Delhi is shedding some of its past burden of third world ideology; is primed to often, if not always, cooperate with other democratic powers to promote freedom; and is coming to term with the complex relationship between democratic values and the use of diplomacy as well as a force to advance them beyond its borders.

RESOLVING INDIA’S DILEMMAS OF BALANCING DEFENSE OF HIGHER UNIVERSAL VALUES AND INTERESTS IN BHUTAN

Bhutan is continuing with its repressive activities with the oblique blessings of the world’s largest democracy, India. The intelligentsia in India has maintained silence over the issue, whereas the Indian media, time and again, cajoles the monarchy in Bhutan. Indian media are full of news praising the king. The same media never told the world that the present king’s father, in 1990 with the help of his army, had expelled one-sixth of the citizens of his country, run a bulldozer over their hamlets, destroyed their orange and cardamom plantations, and unleashed a reign of terror and oppression on elders, women, and children just because they were asking for the establishment of minimum democracy and respect for their human rights. The media never bothered to enlighten the world that in the stage show that is being enacted in the name of the countrywide elections in 2008 and 2013, neither political parties banned for the last twenty-three years and termed illegal nor the people living in refugee camps run by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees for more than two and half decades have been permitted to participate. The total population of Bhutan is around nine hundred thousand, and expelling one-sixth of the people out of this tiny population has been an incident never witnessed in the history of any country in the world. India has always given refuge to the pro-democracy activists of various countries including Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Burma, Tibet, and Nepal. Keeping this in mind, India’s discriminatory attitude toward pro-democracy forces in Bhutan is unanticipated.

India is a luminous beacon of democracy for the world, particularly South Asia, where democracy is not as strong and deep-rooted as in India. India is the guiding force for democracy in Bhutan. Despite the constraints conversed above,
Bhutan also relies heavily on the Indian market for daily consumable goods. The special relations between Bhutan and India are sustained by tradition of regular visits and extensive exchange of views at the highest levels between two through high-level political visits. As conferred in chapter 1 of this book, India has been the largest donor of external aid to Bhutan and its main development partners. In addition, India also funds all major development and infrastructure projects in Bhutan, monetarily and in terms of technical assistance and skilled and unskilled workforce. A free trade regime exists between the two countries, and India remains the biggest market for Bhutan exports and is the major source of almost 90 percent of its imports. The India-Bhutan engagement is multifaceted and covers sectors like hydropower, health, education, human resource development, media, information technology, telecom, and so forth. India has been helping in the generation of hydroelectric power. There are close bilateral relations in the educational and cultural fields. Of late, India has also influenced Bhutan on cultures and in the entertainment industries.

India holds the key to Bhutan’s future. While countries, particularly the United States, China, and the European Union, may have important roles to play, India wields far more leverage. For those who wish to influence Bhutan in a positive direction, it is therefore essential to consider ways that change could be stimulated with the active participation of India, whether through constructive engagement and any form of dialogue in the form of “national reconciliation” between the king and the exiled liberal Bhutanese. As the largest donor, nearest neighbor, and country maintaining the longest history of diplomatic relations, India must seriously look into the inner dynamics of Bhutan’s political upheavals. Even the royalist prime minister has accepted that Indo-Bhutan relations are very special and crucial for the country. “China is a reality and it is best that we do not ignore but accept the reality. However, there is another reality as well and that is something that we must not forget, we have a very special relationship with India. The peace, stability, prosperity and well-being of the Bhutanese people would depend on the ability of the Bhutanese to sustain, nurture and deepen this very crucial relationship with India.” Bhutanese struggling for democracy and human rights from exile and their supporters working secretly in Bhutan were disconsolate and disheartened to hear statements from the former Indian foreign minister and present president of India that repatriation of Bhutanese refugees would create demographic imbalance in Bhutan and the region.
As the largest democracy in the world, India has larger obligations in resolving the crisis. The Bhutanese refugee issue is one of the many cases in point to identify India’s failure to play a brotherly and leadership role in shaping a prosperous and peaceful South Asia. There is a need to bridge the people-to-people gap. The gap is cleared only when events turn favorable in healing grievances and to tighten their relations. The most influential agent to Bhutanese politics—the Indian stakeholders—need to be more pragmatic in studying critically the political scenario of Bhutan. This does not mean interference into internal matters; however, as the biggest donor and nearest neighbor, India has a greater role in resolving the political hodgepodge in Bhutan to turn a situation favorable to all ethnic groups to live in harmony and for the progress of inclusive democracy. As the leader of democracy in South Asia and globally, India has an important place in Bhutan for democracy to burgeon. Not only the civil society, but even the government of India must be very active for advancement and progress of inclusive Bhutanese democracy.

Voices from exile are not for creating a demographic imbalance but are legitimate calls for restoration of rights as guaranteed by the international laws and more importantly the royal constitution of Bhutan, to which India has obligations to uphold. It is appreciable to see the activism by Indian civil society toward the cause of Bhutanese refugees and other Bhutanese taking asylum in Nepal and India. It is expected that analogous support and solidarity toward the democracy cause—the least reported sore in South Asia—from the Indian government by taking the liberal and educated generation of Bhutanese both in exile and inside Bhutan.

The best way of doing so is to fully integrate the minorities in Bhutan into the political system and the civil society, in order to take away the grounds on which the minority grievances will be exploited by the radical groups in exile and inside Bhutan as well as by the emerging role of China in Bhutan, which can be used against the state. The geography and culture are the “constant” factors in Bhutan-India relations, and only the social, political, and economic elements are “strategic” variables, which India can stage-manage to resolve the crisis in Bhutan. The ability to balance these elements can result in the most harmonious relations between the two countries. Now there is less of a problem in the constant elements than those from the strategic ones.

The Indian external ministry’s officials continue to operate under the colonial mind-set and hangover as far as their dealings with Bhutan are concerned. Indian policy makers should appreciate that Bhutan-India relations can be better in
future only if democratic forces, who are concerned about Indian sensitiveness, prevail in Thimphu. Knowingly and unknowingly, India is extending support to, and encouraging, the ultra-leftist and -rightist forces in Bhutan’s polity, which has gradually been weakening the democratic and centrist forces inside and in exile. India’s Bhutan policy, prepared by bureaucrats, could not be fruitful. It needs to be changed, and the Indian bureaucracy should overcome such a mindset. This type of bureaucratic policy has utterly failed in Nepal, and the same may replicate in Bhutan as Bhutan is transiting in a period similar to that of the 1960s in Nepal. No wonder that the late Jawaharlal Nehru proposed India to rise above its “baniyagiri mentality” (business mentality) to be able to exercise its influence internationally.

In the Bhutan case, the author has encapsulated why New Delhi pursued a two-prong strategy, concurrently supporting the dissidents and the Bhutanese state just like in Nepal, where they supported the Maoist, democratic forces and Nepalese state. At the heart of the conflictual tendencies found in South Asia is what Shah calls the “Legacy Raj Syndrome.” A regional milieu characterized by a high level of interstate depredation and bad faith. The core tensions of the Legacy Raj are sustained by the polymorphous character of post-independence power elites, whose conception of self and mission oscillates between that of anti-colonial heroes on the one hand and heirs to the British Raj on the other. It is this contradictory impulse that generates the cycles of destabilization outward into the regional system in the form of economic pressures and political subversions. However, the present Modi government is determined to eliminate these remnants of past.

Modern engagement between India and Bhutan began after India’s 1947 independence from British colonial rule. India sought to continue the British—Himalayan frontier policy (i.e., keeping Bhutan within its de facto sphere of influence). Thus, it is no surprise that New Delhi is pursuing both state and substate links in its approach toward the Bhutanese crisis in order to reach its foreign policy goal of Indian-dependent Bhutan. Paradoxically, this will leave Bhutan extremely volatile, increasing Indian insecurity in the future as the similar approach of dual policy has been unreservedly catastrophic in Nepal, where India lost maximum political and economic space to new political actors, particularly China.

Indian perceptions in foreign policy decision making—a real politick foreign policy attitude—are excessively focused on security matters, which goad New Delhi to support, at different times, the dissidents (informally) and royal
government (formally) in order to ensure Bhutan dependence on Delhi. Such foreign policy behavior has only increased instability and undermined the Delhi’s major foreign policy goal in Bhutan.

India should play a role in the “national reconciliation” process in Bhutan and unifying entire Bhutanese under some form of nationalism that leaves enough space for individual and communal freedoms, which is a constant challenge faced by all democracies and by Bhutan in particular. This means the “two pillars theory—institution of monarchy with constitutional monarch and multiparty democratic polity,” unlike in Nepal,\(^{69}\) where they have supported doing away with a 240-year-old institution of monarchy in favor of a republic. Thus, future India’s Bhutan policy should be based on two pillars: the constitutional monarchy and multiparty democracy. This is the best outlet for the present crisis in Bhutan.

Bhutan does not have to look far to find an example. India, the world’s largest democracy, has constantly struggled with but at the same time has always been able to achieve “unity in diversity,” and it should use its friendly relations with Bhutan to take a more proactive role in promoting this and other essential democratic values in its neighbor state. Thus, a large part of future Bhutan’s democratization process cannot take place without Indian micromanagement through national reconciliation between liberal exiled group and king.\(^{70}\)

The long democratic tradition of India’s political system and her political elites did not seem to have an impact on her foreign policy toward her smaller neighbors. The promotion of democracy could be used when it deemed necessary but could also be neglected when security concerns were touched as pragmatically and persuasively epitomized by its strong support to absolute monarchical rule in Bhutan in deviation to Nepal, where the institution of monarchy was permanently abolished and consigned to the dustbin of history with its support to Maoist and opposition parties in the first decade of this century.

**CONCLUSION**

How should we interpret India’s diverse and multifaceted engagement in Bhutan? Can we deliberate about a radical transformation in New Delhi’s democracy promotion policy in the sense of an increased inclination to get involved in activities anticipated to export its own regime type abroad? Or should India’s foreign policy regarding Bhutan be surmised rather as being
largely consistent with its traditional rejection of democracy promotion and, therefore, as a series of ad hoc measures primarily intended to achieve other goals: security, stability, the limitation of the influence of external powers over Bhutan, and, accordingly, the maintenance of India’s own influence?

The analysis afforded in this chapter insinuates that the Indian decision makers need the monarchy as a “fall back institution” for the stability and custodian of Indian interests in Bhutan. It is time for India to have knowledge of the new ground reality in Bhutan and look beyond the king to forge a cordial relationship with the political parties of Bhutan. This will largely help in maintaining the traditional goodwill India has enjoyed among the Bhutanese people, despite its position on the Bhutanese refugees. India should also play a more meaningful role in the question of Bhutanese refugees. The Bhutanese refugees, not willing to relocate to the United States or elsewhere, or already resettled in West, must be given a right or privilege to return to their motherland.

In a nutshell, this is an appropriate time for India to analyze its foreign policy toward Bhutan in order to articulate a correct notion, if need be, in a continuously churning global scenario. It has already been ascertained in the case of Nepal, and the time is ripe to act on the Bhutanese crisis. This makes it possible to consolidate its position, commensurate with its impressive economic and global stature.

The fact is that, neither the Government of India nor the Indian political parties have ever initiated to resolve this crisis concretely. Whoever tries to resolve this issue is suggested by the intelligence agencies and foreign ministry that the autocracy in Bhutan is in India’s national interest. No one is ready to explain how the establishment of inclusive democracy in Bhutan will negatively impinge on India’s national interests. The key lies in the geopolitical position of Bhutan. Like the Nepalese government, Bhutan also tries to gain confidence of the Indian government by giving threats of using the Chinese card. India should participate in the democratization process through the informal facilitation of talks between the king and liberal generation of exiled Bhutanese. It should be considered a forward-looking attempt to stabilize Bhutan based on the recognition that the exiled parties needed to be allowed to enter the political mainstream in order to avoid future political instability by radical groups. It should become clear that the twin pillar approach is still sustainable in Bhutan, unlike in Nepal.

In this light, India’s facilitation efforts can be considered to have been a far-sighted stabilizing measure, which was based on the recognition that the involvement of the exiled Bhutanese in the political life of Bhutan had become
unavoidable rather than on a transition to democracy promotion for its own sake. The “quiet” character of India’s pro-democracy activities and the emphasis on Bhutan’s autonomy in deciding about its future, as exemplarily expressed in Shyam Saran’s statement, reflect India’s continued adherence to the principles of noninterference and sovereignty. Therefore, going back to the question of India’s potential transformation into a new democracy promoter, the Bhutanese case, when analyzed in minutiae, reveals that New Delhi’s engagement was rather occasional and contingent, and that it originated from the precariousness of Bhutan’s internal situation vis-à-vis China. Democratic activists must coopt the patron state in order to achieve their goal of democratization. Many authoritarian regimes like Bhutan depend on external patron support to maintain their coercive apparatus, and the loss of this support can cause collapse.

If this is the justification, the Bhutanese opposition also has to pledge and ensure India that it will protect its strategic interest in Bhutan. This should be the convergence point for India, the king, and opposition groups in Bhutan. New Delhi’s considered silence on Bhutan has attracted severe criticism both in India and the outside world. For short-term gains, India deserted and abandoned its Gandhian ideals during the pro-democracy protests in Bhutan. In the case of Bhutan, India’s self-protective approach to democracy promotion therefore reflects the balance between domestic and regional constraints and Western expectations.

The analysis and itemization show that India’s involvement in Bhutan was to preempt China’s malevolent shadow and foreign influences, security, and energy rather than democracy promotion. Unstable and fragile neighbors are far more dangerous than prosperous and stable ones. As an ancient Roman poet Horace said, “your own safety is at stake when your neighbor’s house is ablaze.” In recent years, it has emphasized the relevance of a pluralistic, liberal, multicultural and multilingual India as “a model of democratic practice.” New Delhi should also publicly express its concern over Bhutan’s anti-democratic and authoritarian trends. India’s own democratic values and successes in accommodating ethnic diversity should also encourage an activist approach, especially as it seeks recognition as a rising global power with hopes of a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. At the same time, India’s democratic values; its experience negotiating its own ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity; and, more recently, its desire for international recognition as an emerging and democratic global power all have contributed to the Indian
government’s concern that Bhutan concentrate on and address its longstanding conflict through greater power sharing and more inclusive policies.

NOTES

1. Refer to the Ministry of External Affairs, India. It is the remarks made by Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh at the launching of UN Democracy Fund, July 14, 2005. All Ministry of External Affairs documents cited in this study are available at http://meaindia.nic.in/.


3. Refer to the Ministry of External Affairs, India. It is the remarks made by Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh at the launching of UN Democracy Fund, July 14, 2005. All Ministry of External Affairs documents cited in this study are available at http://meaindia.nic.in/.


7. See the Ministry of External Affairs, India, address by Minister of External Affairs Shri Pranab Mukherjee at the Defense Services Staff College, Wellington, “Shaping India’s Foreign Policy to Stake Its Rightful Place in the Comity of Nations,” January 22, 2008. http://meaindia.nic.in/.


24. It has been alleged that the Communist Party of Nepal, the Communist Party of Bhutan, and the Bhutan United Socialist Democratic Party have enjoyed close ties, and how this political dynamic plays out in the near future will have a bearing on a resolution of the issue.


26. Following Bhutan’s request, an India Military Mission was deputed to Bhutan to train and modernize the Bhutanese Army. There were minimum irritants from Bhutan as once China invaded Tibet, it closed its Northern border with China, and the Indian Military Training Team has been stationed in all strategic locations in Western and Eastern Bhutan including in Thimphu, the capital city. India’s assistance toward Bhutan’s security and defense arrangements, specifically in training and equipping the Royal Bhutan Army, was prompted by several factors that include Bhutan’s geostrategic location, the Chinese occupation of Tibet, the 1962 border war between India and China, and the perception of an increasing Chinese threat to the subcontinent. Besides training and courses for army personnel that have been conducted by the Indian Military Training Team in the past, Bhutanese army cadets continue to be sent to the National Defense Academy in Pune and the Indian Military Academy in Dehra Dun, India. The headquarters of the Indian Military Training Team in Bhutan is located in Haa district, which is adjacent to Tibet’s Chumbi valley. An important defense consideration has been the construction of extensive roads network by India’s Border Roads Organization, called Project DANTAK in Bhutan.

27. The letters exchanged along with the treaty also form an important part of the understanding, leading to mutual security. Some of the important clauses of the treaty and the letters spell out that the two countries would inform each other of any misunderstanding with any neighboring state likely to cause a breach in the friendly relations between the two countries, that the two countries would not employ a foreigner whose activities would be prejudicial to the security of the other, and that arms or warlike material which Bhutan imports through the territory of India shall be with the assistance and agreement of India. This particular clause was integrated not only because Bhutan is a landlocked country but more importantly because it is for all practical purposes “India-locked.” It is this one factor which reduces Bhutan’s choices and maneuverability in both security and economic aspects. The Indo-Bhutan equation is a classic example of “big power” political maneuvering with the “smaller power” Bhutan, endeavoring its utmost to retain an independent posture, despite being politically, socioculturally, militarily, and economically dependent on India.

28. See J. Bercovitch, “Super powers and Client States: Analyzing Relations and Patterns of Influence,” in


31. The “chicken’s neck” is the vulnerable Siliguri Corridor in West Bengal, which is the only gateway to all Northeastern states of India. For details on Siliguri Corridor, refer to D. Rizal, South Asia and Beyond: Discourses on Emerging Security Challenges and Concerns (New Delhi: Adroit Publishers, 2012). Also see D. Rizal, Contemporary Governance Challenges and The United Nations Peace Building in Conflict and Post Conflict Societies (New Delhi: Adroit Publishers, 2012).


39. In 1954, China first published a map claiming considerable Bhutanese areas. In 1958, it not only published another map claiming even larger areas of Bhutan, but forcibly took possession of considerable amounts of territory. This made Thimphu turn to Clause 2 of the 1949 Indo-Bhutan treaty, which stipulated that Thimphu would be guided by India in its conduct of external relations. In 1962, Bhutan made its Southeastern part available to the Indian army for safe retreat after it was bested by China. Aggressive postures by China continued, and it was only in 1984 that the two countries opened negotiations for border settlement. Ultimately, Beijing agreed to renounce its claims over 495 square kilometers of areas in the North, but continued to stake claims to the 269 square kilometers of areas in the Northwest, which are adjacent to the Chumbi Valley.


44. Evidence from the ground offers some interesting insights into the potential as well as the limits of future Indian-US political cooperation on democracy promotion in Bhutan. The democratic transition in Nepal, which saw a peaceful movement forcing an ambitious monarch to surrender his absolute powers and the abolition of the institution of the monarchy, is an encouraging precursor. Throughout the crisis, which began with a spectacular regicide in the summer of 2001 and ended five years later, when popular protests forced King Gyanendra to cede power to the people, New Delhi and Washington engaged in unprecedented diplomatic coordination. By cooperating with one other and with other major powers such as the European Union in coercing the Nepalese and by cautioning China not to break the arms embargo imposed by the
Western powers and India, New Delhi and Washington successfully prevented the monarchy from dividing the great powers to its advantage. The Nepal experiences could be seen as heralding a new phase of substantive political cooperation between India and the United States in supporting democracy and that could also happen in Bhutan.

45. For more details see the US cables on Bhutan from Wikileaks, wikileaks-releases-cables-on-bhutan-american-em.


47. Ibid.

48. The social cost of these hydropower projects is very huge. For instance, Amochu hydropower project requires close to 5,310 acres of land, of which a little more than 500 acres belong to 276 families of thirty-three villages in five gewogs of Samtse and Chukha. A detailed project reports, prepared by M/s NPTC Ltd., India, states that a total of twelve villages in three gewogs of Samtse and twenty-one villages in two gewogs of Chukha would be affected by the project. Among the 1,726 people comprising 888 male and 838 female in Phuntsholing and Lokchina gewog under Chukha, and Denchukha, Dorokha, and Tading gewogs in Samtse, are the community of Lhops, whose unique indigenous culture and traditions could be at risk. Also refer to S. Yeshi, “Displaced will be Adequately Recompensed.” http://www.kuenselonline.com (accessed November 9, 2012).

49. India has helped set up the 336 megawatts Chukha hydro project (1986–1987), the 60 megawatts Kurichu (2001–2002), and the 1,020 megawatts Tala project (2006–2007). Three more hydroelectric projects (HEPs) totaling 2,940 megawatts (i.e., the 1,200 MW Punatsangchu-I HEP, the 1,020 megawatts Punatsangchu-II HEP, and the 720 megawatts Mangdechhu HEP) are under construction, and are scheduled to be commissioned by 2018.

50. Of these ten projects, the agreement on the implementation of the Punatsangchhu-I hydroelectric project (HEP) was signed between the two governments on July 28, 2007, while the detailed project reports for Punatsangchu-II and Mangedechu HEPs have been completed; implementation agreements for these two projects have already been signed. The agreement for preparation/updating of detailed project reports of the Amochu Reservoir HEP, the Kuri Gongri HEP, the Chamkharchu-I HEP, and the Kholongchhu HEP have been signed. Another three projects (Sunkosh Reservoir, Wangchu Reservoir, and Bunakha Reservoir) are being signed. The Chukha hydroproject, a 336 megawatts project located on the Wangchu River in Chukha district, was built by India on a turnkey basis at a remarkably low cost of Rs. 2.460 million. A run-of-the-river 1,020 megawatts project on the Wangchu river, downstream of the Chukha HEP, was funded by India with 60 percent as grant and 40 percent at low interest rate at the revised cost of Rs. 4,126 cores. A run-of-the-river 1,200 megawatts project on the Punatsangchu River is located between 7 kilometers and 18.5 kilometers downstream of the Wangdue Phodrang Bridge. Agreement on its implementation was signed on July 28, 2007, in Thimphu. The project is being funded by the Government of India with 40 percent grant and 60 percent loan at an interest of 10 percent at the estimated cost of Rs. 3,815 cores (December 2006 price level). Construction of the project commenced in November 2008 and expected completion is by November 2015.


56. The plans to restructure the Bhutanese security forces by reducing the Royal Bhutan Army to eight thousand men and therefore building up a militia force are clearly aimed at providing for better border security. The advantage of setting up these militias is apparent: local militias supposedly have a better knowledge of the operational areas and might be more useful in intelligence gathering than regular military.


59. For example, it is categorized into executives, non-executives, and skilled and semi-skilled laborers.


63. For details refer to S. D. Muni, India’s Foreign Policy: The Democracy Dimension (With Special Reference to Neighbors) (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2009), vii, 14, 17.

64. Refer to Times of India Online. timesofindia.indiatimes.com (accessed September 4, 2012).

65. For details see, S. D. Muni, India’s Foreign Policy: The Democracy Dimension (With Special Reference to Neighbors) (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2009), vii, 14, 17.


69. In fact, even though India put pressure on King Gyanendra during the first phase by officially protesting against his coup and the suppression of fundamental liberties, its use of a combination of hard and soft persuasion in the following months revealed New Delhi’s willingness to support the king as long as possible according to the twin pillar theory. This was related to the Indian decision makers’ need for the monarchy as a “fallback institution for the stability and integrity of Nepal.” The king was considered to be the actor more able to effectively cope with the destabilizing Maoist insurgency, which India feared could spread to its own border states. It supported the king initially with its desire to stabilize the country and to avoid negative spillover effects across the open border. Also, India’s main reason for compromising on the principle of support for democracy in Nepal seems to have been the need to avoid a further increase in external (especially Chinese) influence in Nepal. Later, India’s far-reaching involvement in the peace and democratization process through the informal facilitation of talks between the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the Seven Party Alliance should be considered a forward-looking attempt to stabilize Nepal based on the recognition that the Maoists needed to be allowed to enter the political mainstream in order to avoid further violence. Against this background, the April 2006 change in India’s approach to Nepal through its more decisive support for democracy should not be overestimated as signaling a radical change in New Delhi’s policy. In fact, this shift took place when the security situation in Nepal was getting out of control and Karan Singh’s visit had further contributed to stirring up popular sentiment. India’s foreign policy regarding Nepal could be interpreted rather as being largely consistent with its traditional rejection of democracy promotion and, therefore, as a series of ad hoc measures primarily intended to achieve other goals: stability, the avoidance of spillover effects to India, the limitation of the influence of external powers over Nepal, and, accordingly, the maintenance of India’s own influence.
70. A joint study conducted by the Ministry of External Affairs and Institute of Defense Studies and Analysis, released on July 2012 by former Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai, makes a case of potential shift in Bhutan’s foreign policy, having far-reaching impact on India’s strategic and political interests. The authors of the study, who visited and interacted with of host of people in Bhutan, sensed that anti-India sentiments were taking root in the country. The country’s intellectual and political classes were discussing to open similar vistas for China to maintain equilibrium with India.

Chapter Eight

Restructuring New Democratic Architecture from the Wheels of Monarchy and Conservative Elites to the Webs of Bhutanese Citizens

The term “democratization” generally refers to a substantial and institutionalized redistribution of power from an authoritarian entity toward elected institutions like parliament and assemblies, and their chosen national and local institutions such as the cabinet and local offices. By this definition, one cannot speak of Bhutan in terms of democratization, but rather only in terms of political opening or liberalization, as absolute power has remained in the hands of the non-elected head of state—the king. Though the reforms did not lead to any decisive transfer of power away from the palace, they did have a positive effect on the relationships between the state and the citizenry. Although political reforms in Bhutan were spurred by many of the same processes that led to democratic transformations in other parts of the world, it has not resulted in democratic transitions. Rather, incumbent elites have attempted to manipulate the process of political liberalization to maintain their positions. In many ways consistent with conventional definitions of political liberalization, incumbents have allowed increased contestation. They allow two royalist political parties to mobilize, reduce censorship, hold state-controlled elections, and allow legislative bodies to debate policies. Incumbents also permit civic organizations promoted mostly by royal family members to organize.

Previous studies substantiated that democracy is a contested concept and connotes distinct thing to different people.¹ Many critics believe that in reality, nothing has changed in Bhutan despite having a royal democracy and the state-controlled elections. The majority considers that the only beneficiaries of the changes in Bhutan are the small elite class, who has been able to manipulate the democratic institutions for their own benefits. Although the Bhutan political landscape may be changing and citizens speak more often and more critically
and vote for representatives, they do not choose their heads of state. In short, Bhutan has seen the political liberalization, but not democratization as claimed by the regime and praised by the media and the international community.

I have argued that the Bhutan monarchy is not a passive bystander that shunned the dramatic transformation pervading the country, but rather actively engaged with the societies’ shifting political, economic, and sociocultural orientations in order to posture himself at the center of them all. This kind of analysis, I foresee, offers a new, more balanced and nuanced understanding of the “king’s predicament” as it pertains to the Bhutan monarch, and brings together several different aspects of the historiography of the period that all too often have remained discrete. Over the past decade, traditional Bhutan has witnessed a transition toward semi-authoritarianism. This dynamic began with tactical political openings, whose goal was to sustain rather than transform autocracies. Enticed by the prospect of change, the Bhutanese sought to imbue the political process with new meanings and opportunities. It is now clear, both within Bhutan and the world, that liberalized autocracy has proven far more durable than once imagined. The trademark mixture of guided pluralism, state-controlled elections, and selective repression in Bhutan is not only a “survival strategy” adopted by an authoritarian Wangchuk regime, but rather a type of political system whose institutions, rules, and logic defies any linear model of democratization.

In reality, the Bhutanese constitution is not a sacrosanct text, but rather an optional reference to which the monarchy can look. It cannot rule against the ultimate decision of the king. Instead, a more fundamental element of the governing system is the concept of tradition adapted and reinvented as suitable that plays the role of an implicit constitution. This does not mean that the royal constitution and reforms are worthless, as certain Bhutanese political actors often claim; rather, the constitution is the base, at least theoretically, of the fragile social contract that was introduced in the years after years of struggle, particularly since the 1950s. The degree of its application and the interpretation of its articles depend on the balance of power between the monarchy and the political elite and the regional and international context. The constitution and reforms fit with the traditional role played by the palace in originating and thus controlling reform. The king remains the fulcrum around whom the entire political system turns. What the king gives with one hand, however, he takes with the other. Present reform has been more image building for the monarch than any real push for change. Political longevity in Bhutan is owed to the
monarchical mastering of the art of top-down political branding, with the palace being the progenitor in possession of partners, scope, pace, and substance of reform. This is what King Jigme (K4), a true political chameleon, has bequeathed to King Khesar (K5). In the post-1990 crisis, there is a trick for every political season. King Jigme (K4) knew how to coopt and exclude, how to bribe and brutalize, and when to embellish the government with elections. He kept movement of opposition in exile in disarray. He planted his most loyal civil servants as clients in the various circles of power. And what patronage-clientelism failed to keep in check, ruthless coercion sought to fix in the dehumanizing prisons and other places of internment and torture.

In his article “Why Monarchies Persist: Balancing between Internal and External Vulnerability,” Hillel Frisch makes a similar argument explaining monarchical survival in the Middle East as a combination of the geostrategically important position of the respective state (external dimension) and the maintenance of abroad regime coalition supporting the monarchy (internal dimension). King Khesar (K5) inherited his father’s politically sneaky “reign of terror”: the torture and inhuman prisons with political prisoners. Thus, this sequential model does not go far enough to curb monarchical writ in the eyes of the Bhutanese people. Democratizing Bhutan would thus need more than rebranding politics or a mere introduction of the royally drafted constitution.

A set of interdependent institutional, economic, ideological, social, and geostrategic factors has created an adaptable ecology of repression, control, and partial openness in Bhutan. The weblike quality of this political ecosystem helps the monarchy to survive and makes its rule immune to any form of strong democratic struggles. Keen observers of Bhutan have long argued that the gradual democratization of the rules of the political game will not materialize without bottom-up pressure from ordinary Bhutanese. It is public outrage over a political system oriented around the power and privilege that has served elsewhere as a catalyst for systemic change. Despite the popularity of the monarchy in Bhutan, there has been a growing mismatch between the public’s aspirations for democracy and ruling elites’ insistence that the existing institutional architecture is needed to accommodate gradual reforms while maintaining stability.

Now it is a time-honored verity that inclusive democracy does not fall from heaven, gifted by a king from throne, nor does it fall from the branch like ripe mangoes. The Bhutanese have to work hard to reach up and pick it and at the same time, reach up and pull down the conservative elites and their entire
authoritarianism system. In Bhutan, royalists and monarchists are rewarded, enemies and oppositions are punished, the neutral are relegated or cautiously abused, and all of these labels are assigned in an arbitrary and capricious manner. Curiously enough, the regime in Bhutan invokes the term democracy to make their case at home and abroad. It is a testament to the value and power of this idea that those who systematically undermine it seek refuge in its name. There is little doubt and debate in Bhutan over the nature of political power and political system, where the power resides and who should hold it. From the outside, therefore, Bhutan appears democratic, when in reality it is not. In fact, much of the authoritarian structure developed by King Jigme (K4) remains in place today. Bhutan has been very successful in creating a democratic façade that has allowed them to receive continued acclaims and support from the West and India. Therefore, Bhutan has been categorized as a “semi-authoritarian democracy.”

There are two ways of thinking about political reform in Bhutan. The first is to enumerate the measures necessary to transform the political system into one that is more democratic. The second is to envisage the political process that might lead to the enactment of these measures. In the case of Bhutan, the needed reforms are obvious. Bhutan has to move from being an invisible executive monarchy toward becoming a visible and real constitutional one. Pragmatic activists are seeking political reform by calling for a genuine constitutional monarchy, where a stronger parliament, independent judiciary, and the elected government circumscribed king’s powers.

In theory, all royalist political parties support the status quo rather than to bring about that political transformation. In practice, they will not make a deliberate effort to make this happen, being more concerned at present with defending their position against the anti-national or opposition in exile than with furthering a democratization agenda. However, political reform will not come from the top spontaneously, and so far there is no combined pressure from the bottom. For Bhutan to move toward democracy, the initiative, or at least the pressure, will have to come not from the palace but from exiled political forces. However, is it possible to envisage a political process that would convince or force the king to alter course and accept a diminished role for the monarchy? Can a new balance of political forces that is emerging in the country lead to such a result? Without a change in the balance of power, Bhutan might become a somewhat more modern and efficient country, but not a more democratic one.
Reform of the political system, as well as policy reform, depends on the emergence of independent political forces that the king can neither suppress nor coopt. By definition, such forces would have to be political movements with large political bases, and this is not dependent on the king’s largesse for their survival or for their standing relative to other groups. The assets of the palace are enormous, given the formal power bestowed on the monarchy by the constitution, the informal power accrued through tradition, and the religious legitimacy enjoyed solely as the protector of Buddhism. Just as important, the palace and royalists have a level of political experience and savvy that all other players lack. For decades, they have been able to outmaneuver every domestic adversary, aided when necessary by the insinuating support of the security apparatus. However, the pace of political change has been glacial, and talk of meaningful parliamentary democracy is a mere rhetoric. No matter what decisions extraparliamentary groups in exile reach in Bhutan in coming years, the semi-authoritarianism is likely to be challenged by the Bhutanese who want deeper and swifter change, particularly in “deep structures.” The reforms of today remain an extremely asymmetrical partnership between the palace and the royalist parties—power resides mostly in the palace as does control over much of the economy. In virtual assessment, Nepal had experienced a similar state of affairs from 1960 to 1990 under a monarchical system with royalist parties. However, once the “critical mass” develops through political, economic, and sociocultural restructuring and changes the balance of power in Bhutanese society, the demand for change in deep structures would be spontaneous as has been witnessed in Nepal in 1990.

Seen from afar, Bhutan’s constitution looks fairly democratic on paper and compares favorably to others around the world. However, those who take a closer look can see that behind the elaborate democratic veneer lies an archaic and absolute monarchy. It is a regime under which three fundamental powers of government—executive, legislative, and judicial—are subjected to the will of the king, where the king’s cronies act as puppet masters of the political system and ransack the economy, and where those who dare to speak out against abuses are promptly crushed and labeled anti-national, immigrants, and non-national. Thus, the author anticipates that Bhutanese democracy will not become a Henry Ford–style democracy, where the Bhutanese people can have a blessing of royal semi-authoritarian democracy as long as they vote the monarchists or royalists. King Keshar (K5) has established an image as young and contemporary monarch
keen to breathe new life into democracy and freedom in the country. The young monarch has magnificently said that:

To me, natural responsibility means upholding values such as integrity, justice and compassion and above all living by that unwritten, but an absolute code of right over wrong, no matter what it is we are trying to achieve as individuals or as a nation. . . . In 2008, when I became King, I promised you that, “throughout my reign, I will never rule you as a King. I will protect you as a parent, care for you as a brother and serve you as a son. I shall give you everything and keep nothing; I shall live such a life as a good human being that you may find it worthy to serve as an example for your children; I have no personal goals other than to fulfill your hopes and aspirations. I shall always serve you, day and night, in the spirit of kindness, justice and equality.” . . . Lastly I end with a prayer for our nation. That the sun of peace and prosperity may always shine in Bhutan—a nation blessed by the teachings of Lord Buddha—a Shangri la blessed by the great Guru Rimpoche and founded by our revered and beloved parent Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal—a country born from the labor of the Jigme Singye Wangchuck and the people of Bhutan.4

King Keshar’s (K5) limited political experience has only begun to be tested. At present, there is little evidence to suggest that he will govern much differently than his father, but certainly the challenges he faces may force a rethinking of the palace’s traditional approach to ruling. Politically, the reforms represent a good first step. They are, however, still far from more comprehensive institutional, inclusive, and measurable reforms, a process that offers a more extensive vision for Bhutan’s future—one that can successfully incorporate the demand of the different constituencies, including opposition in exile in a way that lead to a healthy, pluralistic, and prosperous future for the country from the existing renter-based system. Accommodating people’s growing demands for their inclusion in society, for respect of their ethnicity, religion, and language, takes more than semi-authoritarian democracy and economic growth. Also needed are multicultural policies that recognize differences, champion diversity, and promote cultural freedoms, so that all people can choose to speak their language, practice their religion, and participate in shaping their culture—so that all people can choose to be who they are.

The inclusive, peaceful domestic reforms and repatriation of refugees only will heighten its international profile, rendering its role on the global matrix, more welcome and acceptable. This connotes that the king will have to stick to what he said by repatriating the refugees from exile, freeing all political prisoners from prison, granting citizenship and No Objection Certificates to all Bhutanese, and rectifying apathetic racist policies of the past to build inclusive democracy politically, economically, and socioculturally. In other words, it means “restructuring the present system to new democratic architecture from the wheels of monarch and conservative elites to webs of all Bhutanese citizens.”
Democratic values are not god-sent beliefs, but it is rather a way of thinking that is culturally entrenched and that takes time to grow once sowed. The Bhutan government routinely claims that the kingdom adheres to the “dictates of true democracy.” The king calls it a “democracy,” but I argue persuasively that Bhutanese reform is not a “marriage between the monarch and the ballot box.” The king’s presence in all walks of life becomes so apparent for all people. In this way, a link is formed between the king and people, which has steadily grown into a bond of mutual trust and affection. The throne and the nation become one, and the profound meaning is thus given to the “Bhutan throne.”

The monarchy is an institution, created in 1907, and part of the society. It could not take responsibility for any shortcomings of the society, nor should it take credit for some good things that happen. However, it certainly helps to reflect on who we are and what we do want. It certainly has a place in a historical context of a country. The Bhutanese should mull over about its aptness and sustainability without preconceived ideas. In case of inevitable and incompatible views, could the debate be moved to the ground of higher principles such as the benefit and happiness of the Bhutanese people and national interests? The nation reaps what people sow. The rising absolutism sows the seed of decline, and authoritarian regimes sometimes hasten the transition toward democracy. Do the Bhutanese people have more than enough vision to see the domino effects of what they do today? It is not only sufficient to figure out that the Bhutanese good apple is priceless. Sometimes the good apple is moldy within.

Minuscule Bhutan is wedged between two emerging economic and political powerhouses of the twenty-first century: India and China. The author contemplates that the institution of monarchy is a fundamental constant, variable due to the geostrategic location of the country. The Bhutanese have to conserve and safeguard the institution of monarchy, even if one or two good apples are rotten within. However, they should know where its value lay and use it for the welfare of people and country, as do the European monarchs.

The compromise has not been the way of Bhutanese politics. Solutions, however, will not be found by trying to rewrite the past, but by facing up to long-standing grievances and sufferings in a new spirit of understanding and reconciliation. In Bhutan today, the traditional rallying aphorism is “king, country, and people,” and the emerging maxim is “inclusive constitutional democracy,” as exhibited in Table 8.1.
Table 8.1. Tsa-Wa-Sum vs Inclusive Constitutional Democracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tsa-Wa-Sum versus Inclusive Constitutional Democracy</th>
<th>King and Old Power: Hierarchy, Top-Down</th>
<th>Democracy Activists and the People: Equality, Bottom-Up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actors: king/opposition</td>
<td>Monarchy and royal family members, armed forces, conservative bureaucrats and technocrats</td>
<td>Zhabdrung Rinpoche and people (equal citizens, civil society organization, protests/ demonstration, social and political movements), intellectuals, politicians in exile, political parties in exile, liberal bureaucrats, armed forces, and technocrats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest value</td>
<td>Tsa-Wa-Sum (king, country, and people)</td>
<td>The inclusive constitution of the people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claim to legitimacy</td>
<td>The slogan of good of the nation and country through one nation, one people policy encapsulated under the rubric of Gross National Happiness</td>
<td>The sovereignty of the people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model of polity</td>
<td>Paternalism</td>
<td>Inclusive democracy politically, economically, and socioculturally with unity in diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of operation</td>
<td>Totalistic (control)</td>
<td>Pluralistic (liberty)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal of people</td>
<td>Obedient, subservient, and conformist subjects</td>
<td>Independently thinking and diverse citizens</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s personal tabulation.

The political struggle in Bhutan divulges the dual structure of Bhutanese polity. It is too early to predict which structures and strategies are best suited to carry the political reform process forward without endangering the sovereignty and political stability in the country. Perhaps, keeping in mind the specificity of the current social environment in Bhutan and prevailing geopolities, it may be necessary to find a compromise formula designed to consolidate and build on the positive achievements so far gained from the reform process. The government is divided on the political reform agenda. The moderates within the government believe that the political reform initiated by the king is absolutely necessary, but should be conducted in a way that does not alienate the interests of the already established powers. At this point, their position and interests converge with those of the royal family. The moderates endorse the reform process because they are realists in the sense that if the government does not change the political direction of the country peacefully and constitutionally, it will eventually be changed violently by the people. Therefore, the moderates claim that political reform is now needed for the sake of the future stability in Bhutan. The hardliners in the government, on the other hand, oppose the political reform and are doing their utmost to block or slow down the whole process. The king’s reform initiative
took the hardliners by surprise. The hardliners and royal family are not prepared to share power with opposition including in exile.

The Bhutanese monarchs and ruling elites possibly will not have the luxury each time to assault, torment, and push out the political oppositions or offending population into exile reminiscent of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s, or request India and Nepal or negotiate with the United States, Canada, European countries, or Australia to resettle the political oppositions or offending population. They may not be munificent enough and forthcoming in the future as much water has flowed in Bhutanese rivers since the 1990s. The global order is changing and Bhutan “royal politics” have become an open truth. Thus, it is good for the future of the Bhutanese monarch to exemplify in good faith to all Bhutanese, including people in exile, that the two can coexist. Two may not be after all contradictory in Bhutanese context. It is the common wisdom that only a free society can attain the truth in the making wise choices. Western observers have seen the policies of the king of Bhutan since 2008 as proof of its potential for transformation in small steps. India and the West should support the moderate elements within the royal family and royalist parties and more moderate and liberal group in exile for “national reconciliation” without jeopardizing the country’s sovereignty and stability in the process. Along with verbal pressure for reforms, modernization, and liberalization, contacts between the societies should be used to offer incentives to open up the opaque structures. In any case, until further notice, an inclusive democracy will have to stay off of the agenda of the young monarch.

NOTES

Conclusion

The deliberations in this book have confirmed that Bhutan politics are a mystery, inexplicable to international minds. It requires an unambiguous perception of both the context and content to see the various patterns familiar to politics in Bhutan. It requires the right lenses in one’s glasses to see the various configurations customary to politics in Bhutan. The contemplations in this book make it obvious that if you are a real insider, you will see all developments in Bhutan history and politics as being determined by the kings.

This book has put in plain words a changing dimension of politics in the traditional regime and offers an insight to the emerging transition to royal semi-authoritarian democracy in Bhutan. Bhutan today represents an ambiguous political system that coalesces the rhetorical acquiescence of democracy with illiberal authoritarian attributes and unabated tyranny of the former royalist and monarchist under royal shadow. Royal democracy in Bhutan can best be understood as an attempt to construct a political regime that mimics democratic institutions but work outside the logic of political representation and seek to repress any trace of genuine political pluralism. It is argued that while the traditional concerns persist, looming challenges have attended greater salience in recent years. There is no fairy-tale future for Bhutan. This glitter of royal semi-authoritarian democracy is a “Jigmecracy”—an old wine in new bottle.

From the theoretical perspectives, it is difficult for the scholars and analysts to have common conceptual agreements and acceptable conclusion on royal democracy, which was orchestrated by the traditional regime and power elites in a traditional society as a tightly controlled top-down process and was executed gradually and in a piecemeal manner in a traditional society without devolving any power from the throne. The contemplations in this book reveals that Bhutan is by and large a semi-authoritarian regime, which closely resembles the political regime elaborated by Marina Ottawa—namely, the category of semi-authoritarian states. I also take the view that there is a messy middle ground between the democracy and authoritarian regimes, which seriously repress their people, such as in Bhutan, in the name of façade democracy. Thus, the case of Bhutan is very silent one as it is within an ongoing change from a traditional regime to a hybrid regime. This reflects that there are no abundance of examples.
of traditional regimes in the world today, and this analysis can cover an empty space as we always converse about the authoritarianism of hybrid regime. So Bhutan is a textbook example of a “case of transition from traditional regime.” This is convincingly exhibited by the crucial features of the regime as it exists in Bhutan today and conferred in detail in the preceding chapters of this book.

Semi-authoritarian rule in a traditional regime like Bhutan is often regarded as simple for a state to execute and unworthy of scholarly analysis. Far more attention has been devoted to the challenge of instituting and consolidating democracy. Exploring the authoritarian logic behind the democratic rhetoric is especially important for Bhutan, which is today portrayed as a model of top-down democracy glossed under the rubric of the Gross National Happiness.

Thus, the institutions and practices of a traditional authoritarian regime, including illiberal democracies, continue to suffer scholarly neglect as sustaining political phenomena. Drawing on the Bhutan case, this analysis has made a modest effort to redress that balance. It would be useful to conceptualize the Bhutanese case, refine existing theories of democratization, and perhaps add some categories like transition from traditional regime to the concept of democracy to provide for the possibility of characterizing a case like Bhutan as also for study of future case review of democratizing countries.
Glossary of Bhutanese Expressions

Chathrim  Act, law
Chhoesid Nyi  Religion and politics
Chichab  Chief, lord
Chila  Governor
Chipdrel  Buddhist ceremonial procession of receiving a guest or dignitary
Chiwog  Subadministrative unit of a Gewog/Block
Choeje  Religious nobility, aristocrat
Chupon  Community messenger, herald
Chhoedey Lhentshog  Religious organization
Dar  Scarf conferred to an appointee or elective to an office
Desid  Civil ruler of Bhutan before the establishment of the monarchy
Dozin  Brigadier
Drapa  Peasants cultivating monastic lands as tenants but hereditary in occupation
Dratshang  State monastic body
Dronyer  Guest-master
Dorlkar  White tara
Drungyig  Clerical secretary
Dung  Nobilities
Dungpa  Administrators of a Dungkhag or subdistrict
Dzong  Fortress
Dzongkhag  District
Dzongpon  Lord or chief of a Dzong, a governor
Dzongdag  Civil administrator of a district
Dzonggrab  Deputy to Dzongdag
Dzongtshab  Representative of the king in a Dzong
Genja  Agreement or contract
Gewog  Subadministrative unit of a district
Gho  Menswear
Gongzim  Chamberlain
Gup  Elected head of a Gewog/Block
Dungkhag  Subdistrict
Gyaltsab  Representative of a king
Gyalpo Zimpoen  Royal chamberlain
Je Khenpo  Chief abbot of the state monastic body
Jarog Dzoncheen  Powerful protector deity
Kabney  Scarves of varying colors worn by Bhutanese depending on their official status
Kalyon  Chief minister
Kasho
Royal decree, court order
Kathrim
Legal Code of 1729
Khadar
Silk scarf
Kira
Womenswear
Kuenra
Assembly hall of monks
Kusung Thukten
Sacred representations of the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha
Kutshab
Representative, ambassador
Kudung
Physical relics of Shabdrung Rinpoche
Lam Neten
Abbot of a district monk body
Leytshen
Village herald
Lhengye
Minister or official of ministerial rank
Lhengye Zhungshog
Cabinet
Lugnyi
Two traditions of the secular and spiritual
Lyonpo
Minister
Mangmi/Mangap
Deputy Gup
Namgyelma
Ushnishavijaya
Ngedzin
Recognition
Penlop
Governor of region consisting of several districts
Sungtrul
Speech reincarnation
Tashi Zegye
Eight auspicious materials
Tshepame
Buddha Amitayus
Thram
Land record
Tsa-tong
Previously occupied lands
Thrimthue
Monetary payment in lieu of prison term
Tsa-Wa-Sum
King, country, and people
Thrimzhung
Codified laws
Chhenma
Thongdrel
Huge appliqués of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas
Thrimpon
Judge
Trulkus
Reincarnations of high lamas
Thugtrul
Mind reincarnation
Tshogpa
Village representative
Zhugdrel
Seated row of people
Zhung Ponger
Servants of high officials, category of household
Simon
Chief chamberlain
Zomdue
Village meetings, community assemblies


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Bhutan Municipal Act, 1999
Census Hand Book, 1993
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Civil and Criminal Procedure Code (Amendment) Act of Bhutan, 2011
Civil and Criminal Procedure Code of Bhutan, 2001
Civil Society Organizations Act of Bhutan, 2007
Civil Service Act of Bhutan, 2010
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(Source: http://www.oag.gov.bt/resources/acts/)