

Democracy from Above: Regime Transition in the Kingdom of Bhutan

*Aim Sinpeng**

The tiny Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan became the world's newest democracy this year when its first-ever multi-party election ended over a century of monarchical rule. On March 24, over 80% of eligible Bhutanese voters heeded the King's order and flooded the polls to cast their votes. The Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) secured a landslide victory, winning forty-five out of forty-seven seats in the National Assembly. What explained the recent political regime transformation from an absolute monarchy to democracy in the Kingdom of Bhutan?

Questions relating to why certain countries transition to a democracy when some others do not, have been among the most pivotal and heatedly debated issues for the study of democracy. Over the course of forty years, several political theorists, such as Samuel Huntington and Seymour Martin Lipset, have tried to outline a broad conceptual framework for the types of societies that would be "conducive" to the emergence and the sustainability of democracy. Yet, each time an odd case comes along (i.e. Singapore, South Africa) that defies the cookie-cutter theoretical structure. This prompts political scientists to revisit old theories and draw up new ones to explain such outliers. To this end, our understanding of democratisation is not a static set of beliefs, but a rather fluid and ever-changing view. Bhutan's transition to democracy is an exceptionally unique case that will help enrich the overall literature on democracy as well as further enhance our understanding of the most studied political system in the world.

Three questions will be discussed in this paper. First, can the

* A PhD Political Science candidate, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

recent regime change in Bhutan be contributed to a classical modernisation theory? Although many advocates of modernisation theory have received their fair share of criticism over the years, the theory has stood the test of time relatively well¹ and has remained one of the most cited democratisation schools of thought, especially in Asia where the correlation between the level of economic development and stable democracy is strongest with the advent of democracy in South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan occurring at around the same time as the establishments of their economic institutions. It is no surprise that followers of Bhutanese politics may attribute the recent change in the country's political system to the rise in the population's income. But is this the case of Bhutan?

Second, if the structuralist school of thought, including the modernisation theory, does not explain the introduction of democracy to Bhutan's political system, then what might explain the phenomenon? Can a competing theory of the study of regime change – the voluntarist school of thought – bears the answers to such question?

Third, what are the implications of the answers to the above two questions to the future of the political system in Bhutan? What might be challenges that are laying ahead for the proponents of democracy in Bhutan? Moreover, how can the case of Bhutan's democratisation enrich the overall knowledge of the theories of regime study amongst political scientists?

Few case studies offer a clear-cut voluntarist approach more clearly than Bhutan. Indeed, the transition to democracy is single-handedly introduced and carried out by the monarchy itself. Despite several signs of improved social and economic conditions amongst the populace, the Bhutanese people have

¹ Fukuyama, F (2005). "Confucianism and Democracy," in L. Diamond, M. F. Plattner & P. J. Costopoulos (eds.) *World Religions and Democracy*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

neither developed a sizable middle class nor a sense of civic and political consciousness to push for political change. Quite the contrary, whenever the monarchy implements modernisation or liberalisation reforms, the Bhutanese public resists any change that would devolve the power away from their beloved monarch. Consequently, the historic transformation of the system of governance to democracy represents, by and large, a directive from the royal family, not the wish of the people. The people have entrusted their benevolent King to know what would be best for the country, and would only be too happy to follow his order.

The first part of the essay will focus on theoretical framework of structuralist and voluntarist approaches on political regime change. The second part will address Bhutan's underlying social and economic conditions prior to the regime transformation. Analyses will be given as to why regime change was not called for by the mass, but rather instigated by the ultimate leader of the nation. The historic election, to most Bhutanese, represents a "change in continuity"², rather than a holistic political transformation.

Structuralist v. Voluntarist

The study of regime transformation is dominated by two competing theories: structuralism and voluntarism.³ Some

² This term was coined by Thierry Mathou in Mathou, T (2000). "The politics of Bhutan: Change in continuity," *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 2(2), 250-262. Retrieved from http://www.digitialhimalaya.com/collections/journals/jbs/pdf/JBS_02_02_09.pdf

³ Refer to the following literature for analyses of structuralist and voluntarist arguments: O'Donnell, G. & Schmitter, P (1986). *Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press; Bermeo, N (1990). "Rethinking Regime Change," *Comparative Politics*, 22, 359-377; Mahoney, J. & Snyder, R (1999). "Rethinking Agency and Structure in the Study of Regime Change," *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 34(2), 3-32.; Adeney, K & Wyatt, A (2004). "Democracy in South Asia: Getting Beyond the Structure-Agency Dichotomy," *Political Studies*, 52 (1): 1-

political scientists have referred to them as the “structure-agency dichotomy” (Adeney & Wyatt, 2004, p.1). According to the structuralists, a regime change relies on factors such as “class, sector and world-systematic political economy.”⁴ Human actions are either caused or highly influenced by their social and economic positions. Modernisation theory is an integral part of the structuralist argument for it embraces the idea that choices made by human entities are influenced or shaped by their socio-economic positions. In the trailblazing work of Moore, he first pinpointed that bourgeois revolutions culminate the Western form of democracy.⁵ The middle class in Britain and France - empowered by their new economic fortunes - began to demand political freedom from the ruling landed upper class.⁶ What ensued was a bourgeois revolt against the old establishments. Likewise, Lipset argues that there is a relationship between the degree of economic development and the chance to sustain a democracy.⁷ A country with a lower level of wealth distribution, less widespread education and greater degree of class struggle can breed radicalism because these factors precipitate discontent. Several other scholars have also identified linkage between capitalist development and a chance to sustain democracy.

Other factors such as institutional structures, past conflicts or colonialism are considered instrumental in having long-term impacts on subsequent political developments.⁸ As

18.

⁴ Mahoney, J & Snyder, R (1999). “Rethinking Agency and Structure in the Study of Regime Change,” *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 34(2), p. 3.

⁵ Moore, B., Jr. (1966). *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. Boston: Beacon Press, p. xxi.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lipset, S. M. (1998). *Democracy in Asia and Africa*. Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly, p. 31.

⁸ Rueschemeyer, D., Stephens, E. H. & Stephens, J. D. (1992). *Capitalist Development and Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 23.

Luebbert points out, "...no stable interwar regime was formed that lacked mass support, each regime was based on a distinctive social or class alliance, and each regime had clear material winners and losers" (Luebbert, 1991, p. 306). Furthermore, the dependency theory put forth by O'Donnell has been used to explain why some Latin American countries that had undergone late, but nonetheless, rapid economic growth opted for an authoritarian regime. In the heart of his argument, O'Donnell posits that economic dependence tends to "create pressures towards authoritarian rule" (see Rueschemeyer, Stephens & Stephens, 1992, p. 22). Literature on structuralist approaches has dominated the study of regime change in the past few decades.⁹

Voluntarist approaches have emerged as a competing school of thought that seeks to credit human behavior as key to regime transformation. Varying regime outcomes are a result of agential motivations and interest calculations, rather than their socio-economic roles. The voluntarist arguments place an importance on interests of political actors that are not necessarily rested on social or economic grounds. In *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (Stepan & Linz, 1978), Stepan and Linz attribute the overthrow of President Joao Goulart by the military to Goulart's style of leadership, political acts and strategies and personality.¹⁰ While acknowledging structural factors, such as macro-economic environment, in particular the withdrawal looming economic crisis, Stefan concludes that they are not sufficient to cause a regime collapse where a political leader can play a "special

⁹ Refer to works by Moore, B., Jr. (1966). *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. Boston: Beacon Press; O'Donnell, G (1973). *Modernisation and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics*. Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, Politics of Modernisation Series No. 9; Luebbert, G. (1991). *Liberals, Fascism, or Social Democracy: Social Classes and the Political Origins of Regimes in Interwar Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ Stepan, A & Linz, J (eds.). (1978). *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, p. 133.

role in bringing the regime to a final breakdown point.”¹¹ Likewise, Almond, Flanagan and Mundt discuss in their book *Crisis, Choice and Change: Historical Studies of Political Development* (Almond, Flanagan & Mundt, 1973) that political actors do have room to maneuver, or “a range of freedom of choice”(see Mahoney & Snyder, 1999, p.16), when it comes to the final decision making. In sum, voluntarist theorists believe that structures are “external constraints, which actors may or may not encounter as they pursue their goals.”¹²

What really distinguishes the structuralist from the voluntarist arguments is the level of analysis. Structuralism gives way to macro-level analysis, which encompasses factors such as world system, economic development, domestic-structural and institutional.¹³ To be sure, structuralists believe that a country’s level of economic development, its strategic position in the international arena, “objective social groups defined by their socio-economic positions” (Mahoney & Snyder, 1999, p.9), political parties and military or judicial institutions contribute to a change in regime. On the other hand, voluntarists focus on micro-level elements, such as political leadership and subjective social groups, as sufficient explanations for a regime change. Critics of the structuralist approach argue that the theory underestimates the role of human agency during a change of regime. Although human actions are shaped by their socio-economic positions, the theory “overlooks the possibility that actors may have margins of maneuverability during periods of regime change” (Mahoney & Snyder, p. 5). Moreover, structuralism is seen to be “overly deterministic” (Adeney & Wyatt, 2004, p.5). Democracy has triumphed in some developing countries that did not possess the social and economic prerequisites often referred to when describing Western democracies.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 132.

¹² Mahoney, J & Snyder, R (1999). “Rethinking agency and structure in the study of regime change,” *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 34(2), p. 5.

¹³ Ibid., p. 9.

Bhutan offers another unique perspective on regime transformation. It is argued that, in the case of the recent regime transformation in Bhutan, the structuralist argument cannot offer stand-alone explanations to the political change. The voluntarist school of thought indeed provides better explanations to what is taking place in the Bhutanese political system. The liberalisation reforms carried out by absolute monarchs have, on the one hand, created unprecedented growth in Bhutan's economy in recent years, yet on the other, it has neither created critical mass of the middle class nor developed political consciousness among the mass to push for political change. King Wangchuck single-handedly instigated the political regime change in the country as part of continuously unfolding political liberalisation process.

Modernisation, Bhutanese style

The recent transition from absolutism to a multi-party system can only be appreciated within the wider context of changing social and economic landscape within the Bhutanese society. It is argued that the gradual and structural transformations in the Bhutanese societies have brought important changes to the country's socio-economic development, but have not developed key components that would have enticed a change in regime. In other words, peaceful transformation of the Bhutanese society has not given rise to popular support for a regime change. Unlike many other cases in the study of regime collapses throughout Latin America and Asia, the King's decision to transform the country's governance is not reactionary to a political or economic calamity. Rather, it is a carefully planned and calculated decision. Four notable structural factors are worth mentioning in the following paragraphs to demonstrate the relatively unconventional pattern of Bhutanese modernisation: 1) astounding economic advancement with minimal industrialisation, 2) a growing wealth disparities with a low level of class struggle, 3) a relatively high ratio of uneducated citizenry and 4) a still relatively isolated country with minimal outside interference. To be sure, these factors do not always bring about instability

but they have brought some societies to a crisis point where popular discontent threatens an existing regime. The uneven and imbalanced development in Bhutan, ironically, has produced peace and stability in the country.

Economic advancement with minimal industrialisation

Bhutan has entered an extended period of gradual modernisation without actually undergoing a process of industrialisation. This has two major implications: 1) neither a working class nor middle class have developed in mass and 2) the existing class structure in the society remains relatively unchanged. The middle class is seen as a driver of the

Figure 1: Key indicators determining a degree of industrialisation (1980-2007)

	1980	1987	1995	2001	2007
Population employed in agriculture	85%	87.5%	n/a	79%	75%
Agricultural contribution to GDP	56%	45%	38%	27%	22%
Manufacturing contribution to GDP	4%	6%	9%	6%	n/a
Primary energy consumption ¹⁴ (quadrillion Btu)	0	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.02

Sources: Planning Commission of Bhutan, World Bank, UNDP, IEA

democratisation process because middle class actors play key roles in revolutionary movements. Moore's analysis of Britain and France's transition to democracy places great emphasis on the role of the educated and well-to-do middle class, who demanded 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.¹⁵ Likewise, an organised or large working class can

¹⁴ Primary energy includes petroleum, dry natural gas and coal, and net hydroelectric, solar, geothermal, wind, and wood and waste electricity. Also includes net electricity imports.

¹⁵ Acemoglu, D & Robinson, J. A. (2005). *Economic Origins of*

pose a threat to an established order, as evidence in Luebbert's analyses on the origins of liberalism, fascism and social democracy in interwar Europe.

Bhutan was a late developer, but unlike many of its Asian counterparts, it was not trying to catch up with the West. King Jigme Singye Wangchuck was careful to modernise the state without "Westernising" it – ensuring that the preservation of their rich cultural heritage was regarded as utmost important. Bhutan's social and economic transformations have been focused primarily on the basic needs of the citizens, such as access to water, sanitation and electricity, rather than to place high emphasis on developing industries per se. As a result, Bhutan has not experienced modern industrialisation in the sense of creating a strong manufacturing base. From 1980 to 2001, the size of the manufacturing sector remains largely unchanged (see Figure 1). Six out of eight Bhutanese still earn their living in the countryside, despite the declining importance of the primary sector to the nations' overall gross domestic product (GDP). Another major indicator for a degree of a country's industrialisation is the energy consumption level among the populace. Bhutan is one of the lowest energy consumers in the world, ranking 162nd among its peers, with most of its people relying on traditional firewood for cooking and heating.

Figure 2: Key Development Indicators in Bhutan, 1985-2005

	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005 /2007
GDP per capita, PPP (\$)	1259	1914	2781	3685	5703
Life expectancy (years)	43	49	57	62	65
Roads paved	n/a	77	64	61	62
Telephone per 100 inhabitants	0	0	1	3	11
Internet users per 100 inhabitants	n/a	n/a	0	1	5
Adults with no	90%	85%	n/a	75%	70%

Schooling (over the age of 25)					
Doctors per 10,000 people	0.5	0.8	n/a	1.7	2.3
Urban population % **	4.5	5.5	6.0	7.7	9.1

Sources: *World Development Indicators*, UNESCO, UNDP, WHO, National Statistical Bureau of Bhutan, Planning Commission of Bhutan

* UNESCO estimates

** For 1990 and 1995, the figures are averages calculated by the author

Bhutan managed to quadruple its GDP in the past twenty-years by doing practically one thing: building the Chukha Hydroelectricity power plant. In other words, the average annual GDP growth rate of almost 7% since 1985 has been exclusively propelled by the commissioning and the construction of the hydro power plant.¹⁶ The building of the power plant, temporarily, spurred employment in the energy-related industries (i.e. cement and ferro alloys).¹⁷ 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% of firms in Bhutan are micro enterprises or very small family-run businesses, recording revenue of under \$22,000 per year.¹⁸

The relatively underdeveloped industrial sector in Bhutan results in a weak private sector, a small middle class as well as the working class. The entire economy is wholly dependent on directives from the government (and the King) to introduce any social and economic changes. In fact, neither the middle class nor the working has any incentives to challenge the public order because their economic well-being is almost entirely dependent upon the public sector. The government planned and orchestrated the construction of the hydropower

¹⁶ UNDP (2007). *Macroeconomics of Poverty Reduction: The Case Study of Bhutan*, p. 182. Retrieved from [http://www.undp.org.bt/poverty/docs/Macroeconomics for Bhutan.pdf](http://www.undp.org.bt/poverty/docs/Macroeconomics%20for%20Bhutan.pdf)

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 209.

plant – the single, major source for the development of industries. Incentives and projected benefits are crucial in the process of democratic consolidation because without them, changes to the established order are neither wanted nor attractive.

Growing wealth disparities in relative peace

Policies of gradual modernisation and sustainable development have yielded an interesting contrast within the Bhutanese society: rising inequality with minimal societal tension. How could this happen? There are several 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; such is the case in other South Asian countries, for everyone is entitled to a minimum amount of agricultural land, given freely by the state, on which to grow food for oneself. The state also gives away enough timber for everyone to build modest houses.¹⁹ As a result, while one-third of the population can be categorised as “poor”,²⁰ the country as a whole does enjoy a high level of human development.²¹ This is an important point, because it means that the majority of the population’s basic needs are met, although they are poor in terms of their wealth accumulation. Coupled with the fact that the poor do have land and accommodation, it would be much less plausible for them to have a grudge against the 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 state’s neglect, but rather the harsh geographical reality that has made efforts to equalise socio-economic development much more challenging.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 39.

²⁰ UNDP (2007). *Poverty Analysis Report 2007*, p. 5. Retrieved from http://www.undp.org.bt/poverty/docs/PAR_2007.pdf.

²¹ Based on the UNDP Human Development Indicators (HDI) that measure improvement in life’s expectancy, access to basic services, enrollment in primary schools, etc.

The government's set of policies are heavily geared towards benefiting the poor. 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 non-existent and have been kept minimal to this day.²² This implies that as the country grows economically, the elites will not be burdened with increased taxes – a situation that makes consolidating democracy more attractive and cost-efficient.²³ The share of non-tax revenue also stands to increase in the coming years, allowing the government more independence in its expenditure. Normally in the cases of many authoritarian regimes, when the government's revenue comes from sales of natural resources, such as oil and gas, it severely decreases the level of government's accountability to its own people. However, in the case of Bhutan, the situation is quite the contrary: over one-quarter of the total government's budget is earmarked for health and educational programs. More importantly, due to the policy of fiscal decentralisation, government officials at the local level are permitted to spend twenty-five percent of their budgets on local needs, bypassing approval from the national level.²⁴ The high level of government's support for rural development is not only unwavering, but increasing on a yearly basis. In sum, the self-sufficient and land-owning nature of most Bhutanese, along with the government's heavy focus on helping the poor, have smoothened out the otherwise potentially divisive impacts of growing inequality among the various classes in society.

A high level of adult illiteracy

Five in eight adults in Bhutan have had no schooling (see

²² Budget Summary 2007-2008.

²³ Acemoglu, D & Robinson, J. A. (2005). *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 36.

²⁴ UNDP (2007). *Macroeconomics of Poverty Reduction: The Case Study of Bhutan*, p. 4. Retrieved from http://www.undp.org.bt/poverty/docs/Macroeco_cs_for_Bhutan.pdf

Figure 2) – an illiteracy rate so high it bogs down many other developmental efforts.²⁵ Many scholars have suggested that the higher the level of education, the greater the chances for democracy. Researchers have found that the more educated the citizens, the more likely they are “to believe in democratic values and supported democratic practices.”²⁶ During the run-up to the parliamentary elections, government officials and volunteers were sent out into the countryside to educate the public about the meaning of democracy and civic governance. Two mock elections and countless training sessions were completed to ensure that the election would go smoothly for a country whose majority of the adult population cannot read or write. Right after the election, a group of 400 people from three towns voiced their concerns during the royal audience that democratic transition may have been introduced too early as “illiterate villagers moved from one party to the other and were swayed by whatever said to them” (Kuensel Online, 2008) and that too few people really understood the meaning of democracy.²⁷

In sum, while Bhutan has undergone through drastic, albeit gradual, structural transformation in its economy through decades of modernisation, the country lacks key components that would have led to a popular demand for a regime change. The imbalances in the country’s socio-economic development only substantially increased the level of income per capita,

²⁵ In comparison to other developing nations in Asia, such development represents an uncommon occurrence. In comparison to other Asian countries with a similar level of income, Bhutan has a much lower rate of literacy and level of urbanisation. See figures for Sri Lanka, Thailand, Philippines, and Maldives on the World Development Indicators (WDI). For lower income countries in the same region, see Nepal and Bangladesh.

²⁶ Smith, G. H. (1948). “Liberalism and Level of Information,” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 39: 65-82.

²⁷ People appeal to His Majesty. (2008, April 2). *Kuensel Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.kuenselonline.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=10124>.

yet, other development figures, be it literacy rate, level of urbanisation, and infrastructure, have not made the same speed of progress.²⁸ International development agencies have also acknowledged this rather unusual development that, due to the slow rate of health and educational attainment that is progressing over the years, it is very likely that the increase in the level of human development was a result of an income rise only.²⁹ As a result of these uneven developments, the Bhutanese society lacks a sizable middle class (and working class), educated citizenry, intra-group tension that would have precipitated regime discontent among the public. Modernisation theory, consequently, cannot explain the regime change to democracy in Bhutan.

An isolated state, with minimal external interference

The long, extended period of isolation imposed by the early Kings may have served Bhutan well, but it has also kept its neighbors at bay. Having escaped Britain's colonial aggression in South Asia and subsequently secured India's recognition of its independence, Bhutan went into isolation and maintained its traditional monarchical rule. Bhutan had reasons to feel vulnerable as it was the only surviving Mahayana Buddhist kingdom, after Sikkim was absorbed by India to the south and Tibet was annexed by China to the north. The monarchy played an immensely important role in consolidating fragmented Himalayan groups and exemplifying a unifying force for the development of the Bhutanese state. The country's historians point out that Bhutan would have fallen prey to the Indian dominance had it not been because of the monarchical institution.³⁰ Indeed, the only way for

²⁸ Over 20 years, GNI increased by six fold, while literacy rate increased two and a half times, and percentage of urban population increased two times.

²⁹ UNDP (2007). *Macroeconomics of Poverty Reduction: The Case Study of Bhutan*, p. 38. Retrieved from http://www.undp.org.bt/poverty/docs/Macroeconomics_for_Bhutan.pdf

³⁰ Rose, L. E. (1977). *The Politics of Bhutan*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 107.

Bhutan to maintain its sovereignty was for the country to enter an extended period of isolation to allow time for the monarchy to establish itself as the only legitimate institution. The backwardness of the nation made it much easier for the monarchs to consolidate their power and become the absolute ruler of the people, whose political consciousness was not yet developed.

Although Bhutan slowly came out of self-imposed isolation in the 1980s, no outside powers were exerting pressure for democracy in Bhutan in the lead-up to last week's election. Bhutan has long remained closed to outsiders, maintaining diplomatic relations with very few countries (mostly in Asia). Huntington argues that democratisation in a country may be influenced by "the actions of governments and institutions external to that country."³¹ Successful demonstrations in one country can encourage demonstrations elsewhere since they create a contagion effect.³² India is Bhutan's closest and longest ally, whose relationships extends from economic to military. Through decades of India's assistance to Bhutan, political differences between the two nations were never given significance.³³ India is also the only stable democracy in Bhutan's immediate vicinity. Yet, due to the Indo-Bhutan Treaty of 1949, India pledged non-interference in Bhutan's domestic affairs.³⁴ Bhutan had sought no relationship with its northern neighbor, China, for security concern after Tibet was annexed in 1951. Memberships at international organisations were

³¹ Huntington, S. P. (1991). *The Third wave: Democratisation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, p. 85.

³² Ibid.

³³ Galay, K (2004). "International Politics of Bhutan," *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 10: 90-108. Retrieved from http://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt/main/pub_detail.php?pubid=89.

³⁴ Choden, T (2003). "Indo-Bhutan International Relations: Recent Trends." Paper presented at the *Regional Conference on Comprehensive Security in South Asia*. Kathmandu: Institute for Foreign Affairs, p. 114.

gradually sought after in the early 1970s, with most organisations present in Bhutan are on humanitarian grounds and focus mostly on development work. Being seen as a peaceful, traditional society by most outsiders has helped the monarch escape scrutiny for its authoritarian nature.

Some observers of Bhutanese politics have tried to develop a connection between the social, anti-monarchist unrest in Nepal to the stepping down of the Bhutanese monarchy. The domestic politics in Nepal may have raised concerns about the “future” status of the monarchy amongst the ruling monarchs, but it, in no way, directly puts pressure on the King to abolish absolute monarchy. Unlike King Gyanendra of Nepal, who faced over a decade of demonstrations and popular uprisings before he finally announced the demise of the country’s monarchy, King Wangchuck of Bhutan is widely popular and highly revered among the public. The extremely high level of power and legitimacy that the Bhutanese monarch upholds is unmatched by most leaders in the world, democratically and undemocratically elected. Many Bhutanese widely believe that their Kings would take better care of them than any other politicians.³⁵ The general public took the news of his abdication with grief, sadness, and fear to what the future might hold for them without the King.³⁶ Better yet, the elites were completely caught off guard and repeatedly pleaded to the King to reconsider his decision. Then they were “asked” by the King to reorganise themselves as parties in preparation for the upcoming parliamentary election.³⁷

³⁵ Gier, N (2008). “Two Himalayan Kingdoms Give up their Kings,” *New West Wire*, Retrieved from http://www.newwest.net/main/article/two_himalayan_kingdoms_give_up_their_kings/

³⁶ Chiramal, J. M. (2008). “Dragon Kingdom’s Date with Democracy,” *Kuensel Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.kuenselonline.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=10230>.

³⁷ Sinpeng, A. (2008). “Bhutan: The world’s Youngest Democracy,”

Democracy: A long envisioned goal

The political transformation in Bhutan was a clear case of voluntarism – a situation whereby the leader, in this case the King, decided to give up his power irrespective of his social, economic or political position. In fact the country was stable and prospering, facing no immediate political threat both from the domestic and the international realm. While many dictators and military juntas around the world – not to mention the royal family of neighbouring Nepal – are using both coercions and military might to hang on to power, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck concluded that his throne had come to an end and Bhutan must transition to democracy. When he announced his abdication in 2006, he clarified that democracy was not necessarily Bhutan's goal, but a part of good governance and a key pillar of the King's ultimate objective: to achieve Gross National Happiness (GNH). Innovated by the King himself, the GNH became the country's benchmark to development - promoting a more balanced and equitable development that preserves Bhutan's rich, cultural heritage. In order for the country to achieve "collective happiness", its citizen must become empowered, in the King's view.

The change of regime was therefore not reactionary to any social, economic or political calamities, but a rather long-intended, carefully carved out plan. As Chiramal suggests, "the transition to democracy was no overnight phenomenon, but an ongoing process."³⁸ King Wangchuck had envisioned, in the early 1980s, that eventually Bhutan would need to move away from an absolute monarchy.³⁹ His Majesty says

The Globalist. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobalist.com/DBWeb/storyid.aspx?StoryId=6899>.

³⁸ Chiramal, J. M. (2008). "Dragon Kingdom's Date with Democracy," *Kuensel Online.* Retrieved from <http://www.kuenselonline.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=10230>

³⁹ Part of King Wangchuck's address to the people of Haa illuminates his thinking: "On the introduction of a parliamentary democracy His Majesty explained that the Constitution was being established for

that,

“I do not believe that the system of absolute monarchy, wholly dependent on one individual, is a good system for the people in the long-run. Eventually, no matter how carefully royal children are prepared for their role, the country is bound to face misfortune of inheriting a King of dubious character.”⁴⁰

These words were not a break from the past for the monarchy – as such conviction was passed on since the foremost King. The first steps towards democratic transition had, as a result, been initiated long before the recent election in 2008. For example, in 1953, the National Assembly (Tshogdu) was established by the third King despite the public’s reluctance. “Although the people said they were not ready for such a forum, the King insisted on the establishment of the National Assembly to discuss issues of national interest, promote public welfare and develop political consciousness among the people so that they could play a greater role in the decision making process and running of the country.”⁴¹

Successive Kings follow in the path to gradually liberalise the country’s system of governance through a series of

the future well being of the country and the people. His Majesty said that Monarchy is not the best form of government for Bhutan as it has many flaws. His Majesty pointed out that, in times to come, if the people were fortunate the heir to the Throne would be a dedicated and capable person. On the other hand the heir could be a person of mediocre ability or even an incapable person. That would create problems for a small country like Bhutan.” See “The Constitution: Are We Ready?” (2005, November 5). *Kuensel Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.kuenselonline.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=6217>

⁴⁰ UNDP (2007). *Macroeconomics of Poverty Reduction: The Case Study of Bhutan*, p. 42. Retrieved from [http://www.undp.org.bt/poverty/docs/Macroeco cs for Bhutan.pdf](http://www.undp.org.bt/poverty/docs/Macroeco_cs_for_Bhutan.pdf)

⁴¹ *About the National Assembly of Bhutan*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 30, 2008 from <http://www.nab.gov.bt/aboutus.php>.

decentralisation measures. In 1981, King Wangchuck further decentralised the country's administration by dividing the country into twenty districts (dzongkhags) and set up the District Development Committees to involve local citizens in consultations on the development of their own districts.⁴² The decentralised system of governance is most pronounced at the local level where a group of villagers form a constituency called "gewog" and is administered by "gup" who is elected by the people.⁴³ At the village level gups can settle petty disputes. The most ambitious change towards the development of decentralisation came in 1998 when the King devolved his executive powers to the Council of Ministers who is elected by Member of the Parliament (Chimis). This means that, for the first time, the government would be elected directly by the Parliament. The king even instigated more power to the Parliament by reinstating the vote of confidence in the monarchy. With the decentralised system of governance in place, local people would be able to decide the faith of the monarchy.⁴⁴

The monarchy understands the peril of a tyranny and does not want to maintain the single-ruler system, despite its astounding success in consolidating a once fragmented nation and restoring peace and prosperity to the people. That is why King Wangchuck gave up his throne at the height of his power, while there is peace and prosperity within the country. In essence, King Wangchuck's decision to transition to democracy is a "pre-emptive" one, under the assumption that such regime change is inevitable in the future and it is better to make a peaceful and orderly transformation rather than a violent one. Once the decision has been made to

⁴² Bhutan adopted the First Five-Year Plan from India, which provided the bulk of the assistance (both advisory and financial) and continues to be the major donor of the Kingdom.

⁴³ *Political System*. (n.d.) Retrieved May 3, 2008 from http://www.bhutan.gov.bt/government/abt_politicalsystem.php

⁴⁴ UNDP (2002). *Decentralisation: Bringing People Closer to the People*. UNDP Program in Bhutan, Discussion Paper. Retrieved from <http://www.undp.org.bt/Governance/Decentralisation.pdf>.

transition to parliamentary democracy, the monarchy traveled extensively for two years throughout the country to discuss the drafting of the constitution with various professionals, local leaders and villagers.⁴⁵ It was the King's vision to ensure that the country's first modern constitution would be representative of the people.⁴⁶

What is most interesting about the political transformation of Bhutan is that it represents a true "royal directive" by the monarchy, rather than a proposed change by the elites or the public. 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 reality, however, the elites have simply objected to the monarch's wish to devolve his power to them.⁴⁷ The Bhutanese people, in general, are conservative in nature and have deep reverence

⁴⁵ Australia -Bhutan Friendship Association. (n.d.). *Bhutan Becomes the World's Youngest Democracy*. Retrieved April 2, 2008 from <http://www.australiabhutan.org.bt/abfanews.htm#TravellersandMagicians>.

⁴⁶ A speech from the 2005 Nation Address: "During 2006-2007, the Election Commission will educate our people in the process of parliamentary democracy and electoral practice sessions will be conducted in all the 20 dzongkhags. After 26 years of the process of decentralisation and devolution of powers to the people, I have every confidence that our people will be able to choose the best political party that can provide good governance and serve the interest of the nation. I would like our people to know that the first national election to elect a government under a system of parliamentary democracy will take place in 2008."

⁴⁷ A man who observed the king's audience spoke: "On the eve of the centenary of our Monarchy, it is too painful to even conceive of the idea of the Druk Gyalpo (the King) relinquishing the Throne." Another woman also said, "I never expected to see the day when our own children would discuss such outrageous issues in His Majesty's presence. How can Bhutanese people talk about a King stepping down? Or impeaching the Druk Gyalpo? Or the other personal matters of the royal family?" Refer to the full text: "The Constitution: Are We Ready?" (2005, November 5). *Kuensel Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.kuenselonline.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=6217>.

towards the King and would prefer the paternalistic style of governance under the directions of the monarchy. It is a common occurrence throughout Bhutanese political history that the people would make pleas and requests for reconsideration to the monarchy every time the King ordered any devolution of power from himself to either organs of governments or to the local level of administration.⁴⁸

Future implications

The impact of the recent multi-party election may not be dramatic at first, but it will have far reaching consequences to the democratic development of the entire nation. One thing for certain is that the monarchy is here to stay. The monarchy may have given up rule on paper, but its power remains in force. The time for Bhutan's political transition was deliberately chosen; there is stability and peace in the country, and the royal family has the people's trust. It came as no surprise that both the DPT and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) shared a strikingly similar political platform – a continuation of the monarch's policies – though the latter proposed for a faster change of pace. The first democratic election of Bhutan was not contested, for it lacked real alternatives to the existing discourse. As the new leadership takes its place, King Wangchuck's system of governance, public policy, and official discourse will carry on. The people of Bhutan will continue to regard their King as the Guardian of the nation, who “will ensure stability and protect the long-term interests of the people.”⁴⁹

Nevertheless, there remain significant challenges for the

⁴⁸ “The constitution: Are We Ready?” (2005, November 5). *Kuensel Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.kuenselonline.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=6217>.

⁴⁹ Looking for a team. (2008, February 14). *Kuensel Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.kuenselonline.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=9853>.

future of democracy in Bhutan. Despite over two decades of gradual political liberalisation in preparation for the introduction of the new system, there is no telling that democracy would be sustainable. First of all, there seems to be no real opposition force in the political scene. At least for now, the monarchists will be the only political group running the show. Royalist bureaucrats and civil servants will 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, then there will be little differentiation in 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 democracy in Bhutan after centuries of monarchical rule will certainly give rise to "royalists" or "monarchists" who will continue to be prominent on the political scene for years to come. Only time can tell whether this is a curse or a blessing. To put it in comparative perspective, that is what occurred in Thailand, where royalists prompted a coup in 2006, more than 70 years after the end of monarchy's rule, to topple a democratically elected government.

Secondly, civil liberties in Bhutan remain limited despite recent signs of improvement. The Freedom House has given the country 3.72 scores for civil liberty (0=weakest; 7=highest), with very low points on freedom of association and protection of ethnic minorities.⁵⁰ The main reason why Bhutan scores low in this category is due to the relatively new concept of civic freedom. After more than a century of monarchic rule, such ideas have only been introduced recently in the form of political decentralisation and social liberalisation. The King himself began to educate the Bhutanese people of their rights and duties as citizens⁵¹ and

⁵⁰ Freedom House. (2007). *Freedom Around the World: Bhutan*. Retrieved from <http://www.freedomhouse.org>.

⁵¹ Freedom House. (2007). *Countries in Crossroads: Bhutan. Civil Liberties*. Retrieved from

civic consciousness is just beginning to be formed. The 34-Article Constitution also lays grounds for the development of civil society, to ensure that citizens have the right to freedom of expression. However, foreign observers, such as Freedom House, argue that the Bhutan Information, Communications and Media Act and National Security Act have limited the free flow of information, the protection of journalists and the freedom of expression.⁵² The Editor-in-Chief of Kuensel, the largest state-run newspaper in Bhutan, acknowledged in 2006 that the role of government in media is “all-pervasive” and calls for government subsidies would mean trading off the media’s independence.⁵³ Independent media has only been given permission to be established in 2006, by the King himself, and already some occasional criticisms towards the government have begun to emerge through its website. On recent occasion, Bhutan Observer, an independent newspaper, criticised the government officials for being denied access to the meeting between prime ministers of India and Bhutan, citing “...only the state-run media are allowed. This is not democracy” (Bhutan Observer, 2008).⁵⁴

Lastly, forces of globalisation will pose both an immediate and

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=140&edition=8&country=150§ion=86&ccrpage=37>.

⁵² Freedom House. (2007.) *Freedom Around the World: Bhutan*. Retrieved from <http://www.freedomhouse.org>. For full disclosure of Bhutan’s Information, Communications and Media Act, see <http://www.bicma.gov.bt/final%20ICM%20as%20of%2025th%20Oct06.pdf>. The 1992 National Security Act stipulates that any criticism of the king or Bhutan’s political system is prohibited. Such stipulation, however, is not uncommon among constitutional monarchies in today’s world. For full disclosure of the document, follow the link below.

<http://www.oag.gov.bt/images/acts/National%20Security%20Act.pdf>.

⁵³ Dorji, K (2006). “Media in Bhutan: Now and Then,” *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 14, p. 8.

⁵⁴ Media rights. (2008, May 23). *The Bhutan Observer*. Retrieved from <http://www.bhutanobserver.bt/2008/editorial/05/media-rights.html>.

long-term threat to the identity and the cultural heritage of Bhutan. Past success of the absolute monarchy and the recent first-ever election rests upon the fact that Bhutan is an insular, conservative kingdom with strong roots to its traditions and little access to the outside world. To preserve its culture, the King was careful to modernise Bhutan without westernising it. Recognising that Bhutan cannot remain isolated forever, the King began to open the country up slowly to the outside world. In 1999, television was introduced for the first time in the country. The public reaction was mixed: some say that violence seen on television and movies has led to increased violence and fighting among youths – a phenomenon which contradicts the deeply cherished values of peace and non-violence among the Bhutanese.⁵⁵ In response to public concerns the potential danger of uncensored television, the Association of Private Cable Operators imposed restrictions to allow only thirty channels with “a complete ban of twelve music and other channels that provided ‘controversial’ content.”⁵⁶ Moreover, a 1989 and its subsequent royal decrees require that all wear the national dress while in public during daylight hours. In 2004, Bhutan became the first country in the world to ban the sale and use of tobacco. Only the test of time can tell whether or not Bhutan can withstand the test of globalisation and its impact on its culture.

Conclusion

The transition to democracy in Bhutan will serve as a unique example to the study of regime change for years to come. Since the 1970s, few cases in the sphere of regime study offer a clear-cut voluntarist approach, whereby agential actions are evidently responsible for the transformation of a country’s political system. Most of the literature on regime change has

⁵⁵ Lubow, A (2008). *The Changing Face of Bhutan*. The Smithsonian Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/da-bhutan.html>

⁵⁶ Freedom House (2007). *Freedom Around the World: Bhutan*. <http://www.freedomhouse.org>.

focused heavily towards the structuralist argument – leaving much room for the voluntarist counterpart to make its case.

When observing the country's social and economic development in the past two decades, it is clear that although Bhutan has gone through the modernisation process in the past two 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 industrialisation 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 gap among 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 healthcare and subsidies for farming activities. Better yet, the government is not forced to raise taxes to finance their expenditure on rural development because its major source of earning comes directly from the sales of hydroelectricity. The intra-group 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 an 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.

It was the monarchy who has brought about democracy in Bhutan voluntarily, unpressured by any social or economic tensions. In fact, it was at the height of the King's power, with

peace, stability and prosperity within the country that he decided to abdicate from power to give way to democracy. The very nature of his voluntary act was best exemplified by a series of petitions, gatherings, and demonstrations from both the public and the elites who pleaded repeatedly for the monarch to reconsider his decision. Some of the concerned citizens voiced their suspicions over the question of whether or not Bhutan was indeed “ready” for democracy. However, King Wangchuck reassured his people that democracy would bring more good than harm to the entire nation. The high level of trust that the King received from his people was sufficient to mobilise the country towards democracy. The exceptionally high voter turnout of the country’s first-ever election is a testament to the power and legitimacy that the King has to his subjects.

The case study of Bhutan can, in addition, enrich the theoretical framework of the study of regime transformation. Several political scientists have pointed out that the voluntarist school of thought is a more pertinent explanation for the regime change by way of revolution.⁵⁷ In no case where there is a transition to democracy caused mainly by agential action represents “an evolution” of regime transformation. That is mostly because a gradual political liberalisation from an authoritarian system to a democratic one takes not only time, but an isolated state where no outside influence can have a profound effect on the country’s political future. Bhutan offers this unique situation because it lacks in what Fish terms “external patronage” (Fish, 2001, p. 325) - a situation when a great power has asserted dominance in another country’s affairs - that could greatly impact

⁵⁷ See Stepan, A. & Linz, J. (Eds.). (1978). *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press; Di Palma, G (1990). *To Craft Democracies: An Essay on Democratic Transitions*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Fish, S. M. (2001). “The Inner Asian Anomaly: Mongolia’s Democratisation in Comparative Perspective,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 34: 323-338.

democratisation in the country.⁵⁸ The relative level of isolation, strong culture of political compromise and a high level of consensus among the people have made it possible for Bhutan to gradually transition to a democracy.

⁵⁸ Fish, S. M. (2001). "The Inner Asian Anomaly: Mongolia's Democratisation in Comparative Perspective," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 34: 323-338.

