

Bhutan Democracy Forum 11 May 2018
State of Bhutan's Democracy
Convention Hall
Royal University of Bhutan
Thimphu



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BHUTAN CENTRE
for MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

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Foreword

On the eve of our parliamentary elections, do you know who you are voting for? More important, do you know your leaders well enough to make informed and responsible decisions?

How do voters learn about the vision and ideology, policies and priorities of the registered political parties? How do we analyse their strengths and weaknesses? What are our concerns at the national and local levels and what are the parties' stands on these concerns?

The average Bhutanese voter is dependent on the media to understand the parties and their leaders and these brief, sometimes cursory, exposure to party thinking is often the only basis we have to decide who to vote for.

The Bhutan Democracy Forum 2018 is a rare opportunity for the average person to meet with all the political parties together to seek clarifications, pose questions, and to get to know our future leaders. It is an open forum for discussions between citizens and politicians, for parties to reach a larger group of people who need to make their decisions. It is an opportunity for people to share and state their concerns, issues, suggestions or questions to the political parties. That was the objective of the open forum on Friday, 11th May, 2018, which enabled a healthy discussion on issues of national and local concern.

Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy's (BCMD) goal is to provide an interactive space for Bhutanese CSOs (Civil Society Organisations), thought leaders, media, and citizens to listen to leaders of political parties and to hear their views on the future of the nation. By collaborating with the Royal University of Bhutan, we also provided opportunity for academia and students to participate and ask questions through a successful TV conferencing facility linking Sherubtse College.

The audience of 464 persons who packed the RUB auditorium had an opportunity to talk to the parties and to express their concerns. Many appreciated the experience of a neutral space for discussions in an election year. The presentations and a summary of some of the discussions are being shared in this record of the proceedings.

We also wish to acknowledge our partners, the Bhutan Democracy Dialogue and the Royal University of Bhutan for their collaboration, and to the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy for its support.

The Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy

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The State of
Bhutan's Democracy

Bhutan Democracy Forum 2018



འབྲུག་ལམ་ བརྒྱུད་དང་དམངས་གཙོའི་རྒྱུ་ལ།
BHUTAN CENTRE
for MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY



With support from



Convention Hall, Royal University of Bhutan, May 11, Time: 2-5 PM

The Bhutan Democracy Forum 2018

A Transcript



Representatives of the four political parties at the forum.

Introduction

BCMD Executive Professional Director Siok Sian Pek-Dorji: It's really heartening to see so many young people gathered here in the name of democracy. I think it's really interesting because, sometimes in schools, we don't get the opportunity to discuss this issue. It's been 10 years since Bhutan became a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy and this transition, I think, is one of Bhutan's best-known stories today. It is therefore a very, very powerful story and it is important that, 10 years after we became a democracy, we're able to reflect together on what has happened, to understand where we are today, so that we can move ahead into the future.

Bhutan Democracy Forum 2018 Moderator DASHO KINLEY DORJI: We remind everyone - no tweeting, no photos during the session, because we asked our speakers to be very candid, very open in sharing their thoughts, and I think we should respect that. As there are professional rules in journalism and media, if any of you do any follow-up stories, you want to quote someone, please talk to the person. This is standard journalism practice so this is what we'd like to request of you. BBS is filming the session and it'll be later objectively edited into a documentary programme. We describe this dialogue as an interactive dialogue on an important topic, "The State of Democracy in Bhutan".

I think I need to point out that this was not planned, the gender balance. We happen to have two women and two men. That was not planned. And also the diversity, the representation of Bhutanese society, because we have one Lyonpo, one Aum, one Dasho and one Doctor. So I think perhaps there's hope for Bhutanese democracy. And it will be another surprise when we ask them to speak. They're going to draw lots for the sequence of their presentations. Now I'm going to name the speakers in alphabetical order. So we are going to invite the speakers to the stage. Lyonpo Damcho Dorji, Aum Lily Wangchuk, Dasho Neten Zangmo and Dr Tandi Dorji.

Now by way of introduction, to introduce this dialogue, I'd like to try to provide a context, to place dialogue in a context and perspective. I think we are a democracy with a vision, with a national vision. And this vision, if we are to find a consensus, I'm sure would be Gross National Happiness. Now if we ask 10 people to explain Gross National Happiness (GNH), you'll probably get 20 different answers. So I'm going to try to offer my understanding of Gross National Happiness. I should also submit that this is drawn from the Royal Speeches of His Majesty The King over the past 10 years. It's what I understand as the national vision, which I would call Gross National Happiness.

A nation. We are talking about a national vision — a nation basically comprises a state and society — or a state and the people. And achieving Gross National Happiness would mean ensuring the sovereignty of the state and happiness of the people. His Majesty The King himself has also explained happiness as being a just, harmonious society. These two are interdependent because you cannot actually have a sovereign state without harmony in society and you cannot have harmony and happiness if you don't have sovereignty. So to try and put democracy and our dialogue, this interactive dialogue, in that context, in that perspective, it's back to GNH, which gives us the perspective. GNH tells us that democracy is not the goal, not the ultimate goal, but the path to good governance. I know there is a debate on what democracy is but I'm not going into the details. This is what I understand from a GNH perspective, and when we talk about governance I'd like to explain governance as the functioning of society, the broad functioning of society, not to be confused with government, because governance means functioning of society. Besides government, we have civil society, media, the business community, and the citizens. So in terms of good governance, that's how I understand it. That's how I'd like to explain it when we talk about governance here.

Ten years of democratic governance is not a long time. But at the same time, we also understand that democracy is a process. It is not a goal. You don't reach democracy and stop there. I think it's a process and we know from the experiences here, in the region and around the world, that it's a process that goes on and on. So the idea is that we today, after 10 years, we take stock of where we are and what we have done, what we have not done, what we need to do to try and understand where we are. Ten years of democracy — where has that brought us? Also another goal or objective is to try and raise the national discourse in Bhutan. We're coming into the year of the third general elections, so where is our national discourse?

Now in recent weeks we discussed, we had some conversations among the civil society representatives in Sherubtse College students, and I quoted Eleanor Roosevelt in terms of discourse and discussion, that "great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, small minds discuss people". And interestingly, the almost unanimous response I got from both groups and other people was that we are in stage three at the moment, still discussing people. Now this is not to point fingers at our political leaders, at our government leaders, but all of us. I think it's a reminder that we all need to get involved in this discourse to take our country forward.

The constitution and the whole process of democracy itself give us the mandate. The mandate is to place national interest before personal interest, to place the mandate on political parties to ensure a united society, not a divided one, to ensure security, sovereignty, checks and balances, and good governance. Now I know this is all very complex and broad and it's quite a challenge we are offering our speakers. It's not easy, so we'd like to especially thank them for agreeing to do this...to tackle, to start discussing this very, very complex issue.



Dasho Neten Zangmo - Bhutan Kuen-Nyam Party.

Dasho Neten Zangmo: Good afternoon, la. I guess I'm the small mind talking about people, not a visionary. Sorry for that. I'm the youngest politician here, among the speakers, but perhaps the oldest citizen. Should there be a distinction? Should there be a distinction between the politician and citizen? I'm asking you. Should there be a distinction? An engineer or citizen? A teacher or citizen? There should not be, isn't it? Why is it there? I think you may like to reflect. All of us politicians here, many politicians, and development partners so let's look at that. I thought I had to mention this.

State of democracy — the very fact that we don't have a speaker from the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) is the state of our democracy. By the way I forgot my precious face. (*Rushes back to her seat. Grabs an Atsara Mask. Places it onto her face before the podium, and quickly removing the mask, continues her speech*). I think I feel safe to talk from my heart. I feel safe. I need to remove my mask. This is a state of democracy.

I'm not here to give speeches by the way. I think we've given many speeches. We've heard speeches. I'm not in academia so don't expect all these philosophies from me. But I would like to share my eleven months of political life. And through these experiences and stories that I have, hopefully will illustrate the state of democracy.

Because if I give a big, loud passionate speech, after five or 10 years, when years roll by, I would feel ashamed. We've always heard that democracy is not about politics and political parties but it's about values. But I believe that political culture has defined or re-defined democracy. We talk about values. Trust, for example. I believe that trust is the foundation of values. What is the level of trust among citizens and among neighbours, between citizens and government, between institutions, media fraternity and CSOs and the government? Just have to reflect. I'm just throwing out these issues. Citizens are no more, or we are no more subjects but we are citizens. But what do we mean when we say "I'm a Bhutanese citizen"?

What do we mean by citizenship? And I think in democracy that is perhaps foundational. As a democratic citizen, as a GNH citizen, what does it mean to me? It's not only about my rights but also about my responsibilities, trust, and participation. How do we participate in governance? How do we participate in the democratic process? How have we participated in the last 10 years? Is it only voting? Dasho Kinley Dorji, our moderator, said it's not only about voting.

I do not know that the general mass, the citizens, understand. I've travelled to about 6 Dzongkhags. And you meet people, talk to people, they feel that their right comes only after every five years. Every five years, they are very important. But after that, what? After the elections, what? Some people don't even come to our meetings because they're tired. But we begin to — in fact we need to — advocate that democracy is not only about elections. It's not that the people are important every five years. Every day, people have to be important. Citizens have to be important; citizens cannot be just passive recipients.

There has to be space for citizens' voices. Do we have the space? Do you feel the confidence in expressing your voice... or are you? I think we need to ask these very important questions. We have all the institutions. The Parliament, the media fraternity, the CSOs, the constitutional bodies. Structures we have, but within that structure, how strong are we? How independent are we? Are we able to fulfil our sacred mandate without fear, with full consciousness and with total professionalism? Let's ask ourselves.

The people — when you talk about people I'd like to focus on women. How many women parliamentarians do we have? In the meetings, women will always sit behind. How do we hear our voice? I've been in a meeting with many people. It's very difficult to get women to come forward and join. If you spend one hour with a prospective male candidate, you spend five hours with a woman prospective candidate. Why are we what we are? Are we so scared? I don't think so. We're very well educated, exposed, and disposed. But still, so difficult. In the Parliament how many women do we have? We had six in the past, now I do not know how many we will have. When we go around to talk to women, it's not about fighting against men. It's not about doing what men are doing.

But it's about women's concerns, women's views. Even at home Nangi Ap, Nangi Aum. Nangi Ap has different aspirations. Nangi Aum has different aspirations, concerns, and desires. Similarly, where is the women representation? I think women need to come forward.

Talking about participation. Empowerment. Do citizens feel empowered? Okay, now a lot of power is going down, resources going down, but where has it stopped? Local government? Regional government? Central government? But where is the space for the citizens to participate? Do they know how much budget that they receive? How do they engage? The accountability that they should fix. We went around — Out-reach-clinic (ORCs) cracked when just 8 months old. Roads in disrepair, schools abandoned. And when you ask the citizens, this is your resources, this is your wealth, this is your money, what to do? We don't feel the confidence to raise our voice.

Now you may think I'm just painting a very sorry state but these are the realities. Of course many good things have happened in democracy. 15,000 km roads have been built. The services have been reached. But in terms of the real, softer aspects of democracy, I think we need to really think deeply and remove our masks. And people who are in positions of power need to create the space and build that trust and confidence.

I think the biggest capital of democracy is trust and confidence. Trust and confidence comes only when the fear is removed. You talk to people, civil servants... so scared. Local government —when you go down to the field to mobilise people to talk to, it's so difficult. Sometimes you land up with only six people. Apolitical. What does apolitical mean? We need to engage. And democracy is all about engagement, dialogue, participation, and confidence in each other and trust. How can we have a strong culture of democracy in that environment of fear?

Stories now, I'm going to relate so many stories. That's why I think if you have to have a true culture of democracy, freedom from fear, I think all of us have to work towards freeing ourselves from fear. His Majesty The King said that democracy is for our nation to be secure and sovereign, continue to be secure and sovereign. Democracy has to be strong. And whose responsibility is it to make democracy strong? It's ours. Let's ask this question, what have you done to make democracy strong? What have I done to make democracy strong? What have we done as political leaders to make democracy strong?

And from my little experience — I said I'm the youngest politician here, 11 months old — it's been very divisive. Politics is a very big component of democracy; it's been very divisive. Like, Ata Pezang. I'm just ending with my stories now. Ata Pezang — just because he was working for a party, he couldn't get a pair of oxen to plough his field. Everybody is so suspicious. My friend who went to her constituency, she was asking to stay at somebody's place. He said no, you can't because if I allow you to stay at my home, people will think that I belong to your party. These are the stories and it is not an isolated story, these are stories, which are pervasive whether we like it, or not.

Divorces. We've heard about divorces happening between husband and wife. Relations soured between the father and son. Recently we were in Trashigang. A home in Udzorong has been separated because they didn't get along as the father wanted to vote for a different party. So what are the parties doing about it? Are we making our society more divisive? Ata Dorji Wangdi said, "One question has been troubling me." So I asked, "What is it?" So he said "I'm so happy when I get everything for free. When I don't have to pay anything, I'm so happy. But there are times when I have sleepless nights. It's okay with me but what happens during my children's time? Sometimes it scares me." Where does the money come from? I asked Ata Dorji Wangdi, to ask that question again and again, whether it is the Dzongda or whether it is a Gup, or a politician like me who is visiting him.

One Gup said that the problems in our community, the electoral corruption, the divisiveness, are all created by the party infrastructure. When I joined politics, two days after joining politics, somebody who is in politics now and of course two of my friends who are out of politics, said "You have to change." And my response was I did not come to change myself but I came with my humble feeling that if I can do something about it collectively and individually... Money. My people, my friends, even my students have told me out of concern, "Madam, Ah tse che dhi jin gho. Ma jing bha chin, mi tup (You have to give a little. Not giving will not work in politics)." And we are resigned to the fact that nothing can be done without money. Is that the sort of democracy that we want? People are saying that now: "Dha tsak thug ren dho. Tiru zok ren dho. Lab togm thelm dha me tup (Elections are round the corner and it's time to make money)." Vouchers. "Choe na me sa me lap dam tra ein mae (You are so miserly). Choe gi nga lu voucher tsug ma jin bha chin nga choe lu tshog goen tsug wa me wong maa (You cannot even give me recharge voucher and if you can't give me a voucher, I don't think I can vote for you). Ju tren chi yang mee tang mea (You don't even bother to phone me)." So what is the perception - what is the understanding of democracy? Thank You very much.



Lyonpo Damcho Dorji - People's Democratic Party.

Lyonpo Damcho Dorji: Well I have not brought a mask with me. But as a politician, I'm compelled to wear many masks. Let me begin this panel discussion with a brief background to the topic of this evening's panel discussion, that is, the state of Bhutan's Democracy. Well, democracy in Bhutan is unique in two ways. That it is a gift from the Golden Throne and people have not fought for it. That it has become so successful within a very short period of time. Of course when His Majesty The Fourth King commanded the introduction of democracy in Bhutan, there were a lot of apprehensions among the people. And rightly so, because, having lived under hundred years of Monarchy, under our benevolent Kings, people were apprehensive about change, about democracy.

But His Majesty The King prevailed, and then the process of democratisation of our country began in earnest. Well, I would like to say that democracy did not evolve overnight. In the words of His Majesty The King, the highest achievement of 100 years of Monarchy has been the constant nurturing of democracy. As far back as 1953, His Majesty The Third King, established the National Assembly of Bhutan. In 1959, the *Thrimzhum Choenpo* was enacted by the National Assembly of Bhutan. In 1965, the Royal Advisory Council was established. In 1968 the High Court was established and the Council of Ministers was established in 1998. And so, this was a gradual evolution of democracy, and not a democracy that was introduced overnight. As rightly pointed out by the former Chief Justice, who was also the Chairman of the Constitutional drafting committee, democracy in Bhutan has been evolutionary and not revolutionary.

And then to immortalise the noble vision of His Majesty The Fourth King, the Constitution drafting process was started under the chairmanship of the former Chief Justice of Bhutan, with a 39-member committee. I was in the background working on the draft and later, as the Attorney General, I was also the member secretary of the drafting commission. So therefore, I know at first hand what

has gone into the making of our Constitution. His Majesty The King has commanded that our Constitution contain all the basic ideals of an ideal democracy, all the basic fundamentals of an ideal democracy. Alongside the drafting of our Constitution, His Majesty The Fourth King also established constitutional offices which are very important to the success of a new democracy — the Election Commission of Bhutan, the Anti-Corruption Commission of Bhutan were established. The Royal Audit Authority and the Royal Civil Service Commission were revamped and the Office of the Attorney General was also established. So, thus began the political transition to democracy in 2008.

And it started on a very positive note, and it was reassuring for the people who had a lot of apprehensions when His Majesty The Fourth King said, and I quote, “I’m confident that a very bright and great future lies ahead for Bhutan with a leadership of a new King and a democratic system of government that is most suited for a country as enshrined under the Constitution. I have every confidence that there will be unprecedented progress and prosperity for our nation in the reign of our Fifth King.”

While we assess the state of Bhutan’s democracy after a decade, this was very important to assess it against the backdrop of an ideal democracy. Now there have been a lot of debates and a lot of the proponents who had debated the ideal features of an ideal democracy, but all of them have come to a conclusion, a general consensus, that an ideal democracy must be a combination of a lot of things — namely, effective citizen participation, equality in voting, informed electorates, inclusion in the decision-making process, fundamental rights, political institutions, free and fair and frequent elections. Not just enough to have free and fair elections, if the next election is going to happen in 20 years. So that’s why the vote frequency is also very important, then of course the freedom of expression, the freedom of association and separation of powers.

Well I don’t want to paint a doomsday picture of democracy because it does not do justice to our shining model of a very young democracy. So let me begin by giving a picture of the state of our democracy, by providing you with an assessment of the democratic institutions and other places outside of the democratic institutions, and the people’s perception and apprehensions as to what has been happening. Having been in the Parliament for almost a decade, I have seen how the democratic institutions have evolved over time, how the place outside of the democratic institutions have done their part and, therefore, I would like to assess some of these important democratic institutions and their contribution to the strengthening of our democracy.

Well, in order to go to that, I would also like to quote the aspirations of His Majesty The King when we embarked on this democratisation process. His Majesty The King said and I quote: “The King, country and the people of Bhutan have a common aspiration for democracy. We aspire for a democracy with rule of law, democracy with unity, democracy with integrity, democracy with talent and meritocracy, democracy that is responsible and democracy that serves.” So based on these, I would like to give a fair assessment of the achievements and the failures of the democratic institutions, starting from the Parliament of Bhutan.

Well, as you know, the Parliament of Bhutan consists of His Majesty The King, the National Council and the National Assembly. Well, His Majesty The King, as Head of The State, has been the unifying force and the symbol of unity. His Majesty The King has also been the driving force behind the proper establishment and the strengthening of democracy in our country. The Parliament has also played a key role under the Constitution. The mandate of the Parliament is making laws, representation of the electorate, scrutiny of state functions, reviews of laws, policies and practices and of course, promoting democracy and good governance.

So we have seen that, despite being a very young democracy and having limited experience in governance, the first and the second Parliaments have done a marvellous job and of course, that has also contributed immensely to the strengthening of the democracy. Well, I don't want to bore you by elaborating on all these points because I have limited time. Of course there were apprehensions among the people that because of the debates in the Parliament, which sometimes gets very hot, that party interests prevail over national interests sometimes, that politics is very divisive and creates disharmony in the society.

And therefore there is a need for us to have a matured approach to politics, that politicians must join hands in a constructive approach and we must also define the role of our Members of Parliaments, whether as National Council or ruling or opposition.

The executive, during the two successive governments, have contributed their part. They have shouldered responsibilities for implementation of the 11th five-year plans and provided good governance. They also have defined the goals of state and determined the resources that were required to implement plans. So all in all, there was a successful transition and also a very successful implementation of the plans, thereby contributing to the progress of the country.

But there were also skepticisms and apprehensions, especially perceived nepotism, certain degree of corruption, and lack of adequate discourse with electorate. And so, therefore, there is a need to create more transparency, involvement of the people in the decision-making process, and so on. Similarly the judiciary, the constitutional bodies, and the local government had contributed immensely to the process of democratisation. And also the political parties had given choices based on values and aspirations to people, promoted unity and progressive economic development and ensured national interest prevails over party interest. But again, there are apprehension of regionalism, disharmony, and party interest over national interest.

The role of civil society and women cannot be underestimated in democracy. As Madeleine Albright pointed out, "development without democracy is improbable and democracy without women is impossible". So therefore, the empowerment of women and women's political participation, leadership, is very vital to democracy. Well, so what are the lessons that we take from our ten years of democracy? That there will be no big changes overnight, that we have to take small incremental steps towards democracy, that it's crucial to project hopeful inclusion, vision, that we have to create spaces for discourse, build an image of the political parties and the politicians, and the inclusion of women and youth in the democratic process.

So democracy, ladies and gentlemen, is here to stay and it is thriving. To wrap up the state and success of democracy, it would be most appropriate for me to quote His Majesty The King, and I quote: "For our new democratic system, we establish new democratic institutions and enact new laws. We begin with limited experience and we are certainly faced with challenges. Along the way we are able to fight our weaknesses, respond to change and address problems in a timely manner. As a result of our dedication and commitment, our institutions continue to grow stronger each day, each year, our democracy must meet the needs of the people and country while at the same time, our people must always have confidence in the future of our democracy. If through these endeavours we create a just and harmonious society, we will truly have a People's democracy."

Thank you.



Dr Tandi Dorji - Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa.

Dr Tandi Dorji: Your excellencies, members of Parliament, representatives from the media, teachers and students. I would like to begin by commending my two predecessors, especially Dasho Neten Zangmo who has as usual spoken from her heart and was very candid about the actual realities of democracy in Bhutan. I would also like to thank Lyonpo for summarising the state of democracy from where we began to where we are today. And I would like to also echo what he just said, that for Bhutan, the manner in which democracy was introduced is very different from so many other countries.

Also what Dasho Kinley Dorji earlier said, when he introduced this forum — we always talk about democracy but in the Constitution, there are two other words following that, Democratic Constitutional Monarchy. *Ani nga choe sem ley jey ni mi wong zoer zhug ni ein la* (We should never forget these words). That in our haste to make democracy successful we, as Aum Neten said, all of us have the trust and confidence in each other and to make sure that democracy succeeds.

But I would like to begin by talking about the democracy index. All of us know, especially from the media, about the rankings. Where does Bhutan rank on the global scale? So the democratic index, which is developed by the Economic Intelligence Unit, places Bhutan at 99 out of 167 countries. And I think that's fabulous, because 10 years ago when we started we scored only 2 out of the possible 10 in that index. And today we score 5.08 and we have achieved 99, which means that democracy is proceeding well.

But when we talk about the democracy index, and as mentioned by my predecessors, it's not only about the voting and the elections that take place. According to that index, there are five other categories in which countries are categorised, and that is the electoral process and pluralism, the ability to have different viewpoints. The second one is on the functioning of the government. The third is on political participation, political culture, and lastly, civil liberties.

And what has happened in Bhutan is we talk mostly about political participation. From that point of view, in 2008, when the first elections were held, there were only two political parties. All of us were in either one or the other. The elections were carried out successfully with high voter turnout. And then, come 2013, there were five registered political parties. Four went on to contest the elections, and today as we sit, we are four political parties. Voter turnout has gone down over the years, but nevertheless political participation has been very good.

So although, as Dasho mentioned, there are many definitions of democracy, for me I think democracy is about the power of people to vote the representatives from among themselves who will in turn enact laws that will rule the country for a fixed term. And therefore, if we look at it that way, then definitely we have a very good functioning democracy. However, I think what is important for us to assess is how are we electing our leaders? How are parties being elected? What is the basis of your voting for a particular candidate? And, therefore, this leads me to question the manner in which parties are seeking votes from our voters.

And I think in many ways, parties in Bhutan are also to blame. Somehow or other, we have gone with regional democracies. We are influenced more by our neighbours than the well-functioning democracies. By that I mean that, today, if we look at the four political parties, can you really segregate us into clear political ideologies? Are there clear distinctions between these four parties? When you vote for a political party, can you expect the policies and plans and programmes that they will enact over the next five years? It is entirely based on the promises parties make during the campaign period. Unfortunately, those promises are not in the national interest but on short-term interest and their haste to grab power. And that is where our voters need to be more aware, and therefore it is also important for us — political parties — to have strong ideologies on which we stand, so that our voters can predict what to expect over the duration in which the party exists.

For us in Druk Nyamdrup Tshogpa, we have always established our ideology as social democracy. We have been encouraged by the strong foundations, especially in the Nordic countries, where democracy is well functioning, and it is important that all political parties establish themselves in certain ideologies. Given the fact that, yes, we started only eight years ago, none of us are experts in democracy. None of us are actually politicians. I'm a medical doctor by profession, a paediatrician, but come 2008, with very few people coming into politics, I left my profession to fulfil democracy that was granted to us. And therefore, I know that it is just 10 years, there are problems but nevertheless it is thriving, as I said.

There are problems, if you look at the established democracies like America, although they had their independence and is one of the first countries to have drafted their Constitution, it wasn't after 40-50 years that things started becoming better. That also only happened after George Washington left office in 1796. So for us to immediately to become a well-functioning democracy within 10 years, I think is difficult for us all to ask for that. We are striving... I know it is also our roles to establish good procedures, to behave in a manner that is listed in the various Acts and also as a political party to be responsible to our voters. So therefore we can expect that there will always be teething problems. But these are not something that cannot be solved.

Then to speak a little about my own experience, I have been in politics since 2008, and just to highlight some of the experiences that we face as politicians and parties. One is about the parties that are out of Parliament. There may be any number of parties, but ultimately there is going to be only two parties

in the Parliament. And therefore, what is the role of political parties outside the Parliament? We have been trying to engage ourselves effectively, keeping track of decisions being taken at the national level, trying to put our point of view to the voters through the media. However, and some of you may not know this, but one is a very important recent decision by the High Court in our case against the government. One of the rulings was that parties other than the opposition and the government are not answerable and accountable to the people.

Therefore, the court did not take a decision on the case that we have put up against the government because they said, “You are not accountable, you are not answerable, only the opposition can do that.” So that raises a very important question. Then what is the role of parties outside the Parliament? How can we play our role more effectively? Second is on the problems in implementing the process for political parties. Again here, while we have many provisions and various Acts, to carry out political activities is very difficult.

For an established political party, if we want to carry out any activity, there are a number of rules and regulations, there are a number of approvals to be sought. It's not easy to call a meeting —you have to get permission, that also only during certain periods. Therefore, some of these are quite rigid. Second is also about making equal opportunities for parties to be able to connect with their voters. For the two parties that are in Parliament — the government and the opposition — they can meet people on a daily basis. They can travel around the country, talk about the issues. However, for parties outside the Parliament, that is not possible and therefore this is something that we have been trying to raise, saying that we need a level playing field.

Coming to a level playing field, Bhutan is unique because we get campaign funds from the government. However, here again, I think there needs to be careful thinking. I know in the past we have deliberated on the state providing funds for political parties to sustain themselves during the non-election years, and the lack of these finances. Of course Aum Neten alluded to whether money is required. Money is definitely required. You need to have an office. You need to pay your staff. You need to travel. However, the sources from which parties can source their funds is very limited.

And how many people in Bhutan can actually contribute towards political parties? How many people actually want to be part of a political party? Actually there are a number of things to talk about, but seeing that there is only one minute, I would just like to summarise by saying, and like to conclude by saying, that yes, there are problems, but democracy will succeed. It will need some time. We can see the difference from 2008 to 2018. People are now more aware. You cannot now use influence or bribe because people will ultimately vote for the person they really want to vote for.

So I can definitely see some good changes that are taking place despite all the problems and difficulties that we may have in our infant steps in democracy. I would like to be optimistic. And that is because of what is stated, at the very beginning paragraph of the preamble of the Constitution, which is the basis of our democracy. So I'll just quote: “We the people of Bhutan, blessed with the Triple Gem, the protection of our guardian Deities, the wisdom of our leaders, the everlasting fortunes of the Palden Drukpa and the guidance of His Majesty The Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuk, we can make democracy better.”

Thank you. Kadrinche.



Aum Lily Wangchhuk - Druk Phuensum Tshogpa.

Aum Lily Wangchhuk: Kuzu Zangpo and good afternoon to everyone. Let me start by applauding all the distinguished guests representing our Parliament — past and present, various political parties, Civil Society Organisations, media, students from various institutes, including our young citizens and ladies, gentleman for sparing your precious time to be here. Your presence here is a manifestation of the importance that each of us attaches to “the state of our democracy”. And I am immensely privileged to share my thoughts on “The State of Our Democracy” with such a distinguished gathering.

I also take this opportunity to thank BCMD, Bhutan Democracy Dialogue and Royal University of Bhutan for coordinating this important meet. I believe that your investment here will go a long way in shaping Bhutan into a model democracy in the world.

Today I stand here, not as the President of Druk Chirwang Tshogpa, but as party representative & spokesperson for Druk Phuensum Tshogpa, a party that I joined two months ago for the same reason — to better the state of our democracy.

My motivation to better the state of democracy is primarily sparked by my total commitment to safeguard and help nurture our democracy, the sacred gift from the throne. Our democracy is unique from its noble birth, where His Majesty The Fourth Druk Gyalpo selflessly forsake absolute Monarchy and bestowed democracy to Bhutan. Forcing democracy onto the people by those in power is unheard of in world history. History only records democracy had to be earned through hardship, revolution, and bloodshed. Today, we have every reason to not only celebrate but also expend every resource we have to nurture a unique democracy in its truest sense and fulfil His Majesty’s vision for Bhutan and the world.

However, as a dedicated citizen, I remain concerned about some forces that challenge our state of democracy and shake the core of values of unity and belonging that our Monarchs have so carefully

nurtured over 100 years. Today our principle of “One Nation One People” is at great risk of being affected with divisive politics, victimisation of supporters, and differences over political choice, affecting relationship between families and friends. It is sad to observe that families, friends, and neighbours across the country have been torn apart by political parties. With such challenges, Bhutanese are losing faith in politicians and democracy.

I would like to take the opportunity to highlight some of the specific challenges, and how we can subtly overcome them to advance a model democracy.

Politicians

Just as our democracy is unique, so are our politicians, who are unique and well-meaning. We need to stop projecting politics and politicians negatively, so as to attract the best of the best and retain them in politics. Becoming politicians is not easy and we must acknowledge this with respect, civility, and empathy. We must collectively welcome, encourage and support such politicians and not demonise them. Our laws should also be flexible to allow the best from the civil service to join politics.

Citizens

There is no state or democracy without citizenry! Democracy is what the citizenry votes, so each one of us here also need to take personal responsibility to make our democracy meaningful by engaging in forums, holding our elected leaders accountable, contributing in making communities better and above all, upholding our unity and solidarity. It is critical we get out to vote and elect the best leaders, otherwise the opposite might happen. In particular, I would like to urge our youth and women to get out and vote by all means and be part of the change you wish to see and be the voice for women and youth who are left behind.

Media

A free media is an indicator of democracy. However, it can also hijack election to disadvantage the better option. This danger is significant in situations where voters lack the skills to discriminate damaging and fake messages from good ones. Social media is the devil in disguise when it comes to advancing false messages and negative campaigns that could put the future of millions and the nation at stake. For instance, political parties under fake identities to tarnish images of aspiring politicians, political parties, and candidates. This is inciting fear, anger, and resentment and greatly dividing the people. There is an urgent need to address the negative, fake coverage on social media and I humbly call upon authorities such as ECB, BICMA, and BMF to consider interventions, carry out civic education and launch awareness campaigns to educate voters to filter messages they receive.

Protection of Institutions

It is also important for us to protect and ensure independence of important institutions like the political parties, constitutional bodies, media, judiciary, Central Bank, educational institutes and civil service. The integrity of these institutions is an indicator of the health of our democracy.

In particular, I would like to highlight the need to respect and protect political parties. Health and integrity of political parties is a measure of the success of democracy. However, over a decade, I have observed the growing division along the party lines, and the division is even wider at the grassroots level. Political campaigns are marred with negative campaigning, mudslinging, rumours, political

corruption and bribery, instead of leading the people to make enlightened decisions to elect top politicians to form outstanding governments. I call upon the leaders and candidates of all political parties, let us put an end to this unhealthy political trend.

To pursue a political party's vested interest, one can even go to the extent of branding an entire party like DPT as an anti-national party. If 45 percent of the population are supporting DPT, are we saying some 45 percent of Bhutanese are *ngolops*? And *ngolops* against whom? Some 50 percent of the candidates in DPT are currently new, and all of us are there with our positive motivation. During my recent interaction with the party, the discussions have largely been around how best we can serve our country. I have not found their loyalty and devotion towards Tsa-Wa-Sum any different from any other Bhutanese citizen.

Monarchy is our most sacred institution and no Bhutanese can ever forget that we are where we are today as a nation because of the selfless contribution made by our Kings. Our King is above all of us and every Bhutanese heart is filled with gratitude and love for our King, including members of DPT. How can anyone even question another's loyalty and devotion to our King? No party or individual should claim a monopoly of loyalty and dedication to the Throne, and question another party's or individual's loyalty to the Throne and dedication to serve the *Tsa-Wa-Sum*.

In the name of democracy, we have greatly divided the people. Now, let us not divide the people from their King. The very word, "*ngolop*" should not even be allowed to be used in Bhutanese politics, let alone accuse anyone. By using such a word and accusing one another, what kind of division, fear and discrimination are we creating amongst our citizens, what kind of messages are we conveying to our children, what kind of impression are we sending out to the world — that we are divided? Such harmful messages, when shared on social media, is accessible to the entire world, portraying a wrong and dangerous impression, leaving us vulnerable for others to meddle in the internal affairs of the country. This issue is not about DPT but it should be a national concern.

In the words of His Majesty The King, "Democracy is a timeless process in our collective endeavour to build a peaceful and prosperous nation." Let us ask ourselves today, are we moving in the right direction? His Majesty The King had stated at the last National Day at Haa, "There are two dimensions to the threats that can undermine the sovereignty and security of a nation — external and internal conditions and factors...No matter how grave the external threats may be, nothing can harm us if we are united like members of a closely bonded family." This is an important reminder for all of us to stay united. Past is past. We must learn to forgive, forget, and move forward in a spirit of understanding and unity, since focusing on what unites us is patriotism, not what divides us.

Our political leaders must be willing to sustain something greater than their own survival by not compromising our national interest by considering the following:

The institution of Monarchy is our most sacred institution, which is held in high esteem and reverence by every Bhutanese. Parties should not resort to use of the sacred institution — the Throne — to pursue their political agenda. The Throne is a sacrosanct institution and no party should exploit the institution for their interest.

No party should use the Throne and royal prerogatives such as land kidu, census as part of their pledges.

India-Bhutan relations is something every party considers as the cornerstone of our foreign policy. No party should distort facts and bring up foreign relations, particularly Indo-Bhutan or Indo-China.

We should not bring out national security issues and pledges to armed forces.

We should not use religion and religious bodies.

We should not use regional, ethnicity, and caste.

We should support journalists and allow free media.

We should promote regular inter-party meetings like these to develop a common understanding for united Bhutan.

For the sake of prospering our unique democracy, I challenge existing political parties and their leaders to sign a pledge here today, committing to stay away from divisive politics. Let us compete in the 2018 elections on our ideas and competence of our candidates, so that the best can win, so that the people of Bhutan can win. Any misuse and abuse of this commitment could be resolved through intra-party mechanism by a multi-party committee within BDD, in the presence of media.

We have done ourselves, our people, our nation enough harm in the name of politics and democracy. Can we not agree to survive in peace and harmony, united and strong, as one nation, one people? There are no *ngolops* in our country for we all love our King and country. We are neither DPT, PDP, DNT, or BKP but Bhutanese first — can we not share this message across the country, that we are all one?

Democracy is too important to be wasted in petty arguments, wrong judgements or *gotcha* statements. To engage, we must connect, understand, and work in a spirit of harmony and respect.

I know it's hard to achieve this, but it's harder not to try, if you are true politicians, so I humbly call upon all politicians, media, voters — let us set our differences aside and work on setting Bhutan off on a journey towards the best democracy in the world, because Bhutan and our Kings deserve this for their sacrifices.

I end my statement with a question today. If politics and democracy mean division of our country, posing grave danger to our own national security, then it is time for all of us here to re-think today, do we really want democracy? Are we taking Bhutan towards the right direction? If political leaders truly care about the *Tsa-Wa-Sum* as you claim, you will not hesitate in signing our commitment pledge today.

Thank You & Tashi Delek!

Question and Answer Session



The forum was an opportunity for youth to interact with the four political parties.

Moderator: Is this a problem? Is the Bhutanese politician unfairly targeted and demonised?

Lyonpo Damcho Dorji: Well, in my outline, I have also made the same point, that the image of political parties, and in particular politicians, must be improved. And for the very fact that in a democracy, political parties and politicians are the main players and therefore, if we portray a very bad image of a political party or politicians, then it is going to create disillusion among the people. It is going to create confusion. It is going to make the people lose faith in the political system itself, and that is going to really affect the nurturing of the democracy and the flourishing of the democracy.

Dasho Neten Zangmo: I also believe that politicians are unfairly demonised, like anywhere in the world. I've said in the past that we cannot trust politicians. I think that's unfair. But having said that, the politicians also need to look into themselves. Is it their behaviour that actually compels the citizens, the larger mass, to have that opinion? I think that is also important, but in Bhutan — such a small country — we take pride in saying that Gross National Happiness is our development philosophy. We also take pride in saying that we are a deeply spiritual society, but can we also re-define our politics, that politics is not dirty and that politics can be clean. I think that responsibility lies with all of us. You just cannot put this responsibility on the politicians and the political parties but, having said that, I think the bigger responsibility also lies on the politicians and the political parties and particularly the leadership.

Dr Tandi Dorji: Nothing very different, as Fareed Zakaria, one of the well-known CNN political analysts said, I think it's a global phenomena — “democratic recession” he called it. I think this is mainly fuelled.....because politicians everywhere around the world are perceived as being hungry for power, only talking about *thob thangs* (perks and benefits) and how much more can I make. I think those have fuelled this belief. And as Dasho said, I think it's in the interest of everyone, especially politicians, that we steer according to our principles and set good examples for future generations.

Moderator: Are people voting entirely based on promises — which comes to the question, do we not have an ideology? Do the parties need to make more effort in establishing and identifying, conveying political ideologies?

Dasho Neten Zangmo: I think people often ask “what is your ideology?” But I guess for all the parties, their ultimate goal will be Gross National Happiness. The only thing that parties pick up, certain values, like DPT has equity and justice, but I guess that's also what other parties adopt. But I would specifically like to not go to ideology but to the pledges. It's all about winning by hook or by crook, so when you are bent on winning by hook or by crook, you will not spare anything. You can be divisive, you can in fact do anything. The experience over the last 10 years is with that attitude of “winning by hook or by crook”.

Political corruption — electoral corruption — why has it come about? So it's also about the short-term gain as well as the unethical behaviour of political parties and politicians. Aum Lily Wangchhuk also mentioned social media....all the avenues that we used in terms of maligning the other, instead of really looking at the long-term goal of the nation. So the political parties have to go beyond just five years....the country is not only just about five years. The party is just the means, the party is not the end. And I think that is what the education.... the parties have the responsibility to advocate, and the citizens must understand, but when you look at the larger mass, it's not so.

Aum Lily Wangchhuk: In my former party, the ideology was social democracy because I felt more closely related to that, but currently, during my interaction with DPT as well I think that the fact the

party is focusing more on equity and justice. I would say that it's also very related to social democracy as well. But having said that, I think one of the realisations that political parties had when we were in Denmark — when we were on a study tour — was that our aspirations for our country were all very similar, in a sense that we are looking at strengthening sovereignty, security, greater self-reliance, and prosperity. Our objectives were all very similar but it's just that our approaches make us different, and I think because the approach makes us different, that probably might put us in different groups of ideology. So currently, as you all are aware, I think parties in Bhutan have not really differentiated themselves along ideological differences with everyone probably coming up with similar aspirations for the country.

Lyonpo Damcho Dorji: I don't think that politicians, political parties, seek votes based on the promises which I would like to call pledges, not just on real empty promises and also based on ideology. So that's exactly what we did, People's Democratic Party in 2013 — we had very specific pledges, people, and we had also pledges that were to be fulfilled in 100 days. And of course we also had an ideology that is the “decentralisation” which perhaps deserves to be brought to the forefront. And therefore it has been a mix of ideology and pledges. I don't agree that political parties obtain their votes by hook or by crook, especially for PDP. We have all the time endeavoured in the interest of the people, the long-term interest of the country, as well as the short and medium terms interest of the grassroots and through these conditions, we were able to get the support of the people.

Moderator: Thank you very much, Lyonpo. I think that this issue really leaves the question with all of us as citizens, all of us as voters. In the absence of very clear-cut ideologies and the issue of promises and pledges, I think over the next few months, many of us would like to know, like a clear stance from our potential leaders, on the question of why should I vote for you? I think that's a question we take away.

Now coming to Lyonpo Domcho's presentation, what I remember is the gradual evolution of Bhutan's democracy over the years. In which case, now I would like to ask the other three — then why were people so apprehensive, why were people so surprised, shocked, overwhelmed when democracy was announced?

Aum Lily Wangchhuk: The top-down initiatives towards greater decentralisation and democratisation initiatives were actually introduced way back in 1980s. But I would think there was more involvement with people at the grassroots level, in terms of electing their local leaders, carrying out development activities and planning. But democracy in its true sense, I think, probably we only embraced in 2006, when His Majesty The Fourth Druk Gyalpo announced that we were going to be making this political transition to a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy and putting all relevant institutions in its place.

So I think the earlier initiatives were more preparing towards the decentralisation and democratic process, but in its truest sense, for mission of political parties, establishment of related institutions, constitutional bodies.... actually happened after 2006. And all of us have been very comfortable in the earliest system of monarchy where most of us did not take much responsibility for where we are today.

Dasho Neten Zangmo: The very fact that the notion of the King not being there, almost like a parent, and then having to vote for a party, is something that we were not used to. But having said that, I think structures are there....it's wonderful, yes, we have put in place structures, yes, we have to be happy. But at the end of the day, the crux of the matter is how much do people understand? For now when you visit — I am sure that it will also be true for other parties — that people are resigned to the fact that nothing can be done, people are resigned to the fact no matter who comes to power,

it's always about themselves and not for us. People don't attend meetings and come to meetings. Voting, for example — we take pride in saying that yes, 55 percent of voters participated in the recent National Council elections.

But are we happy about it? How are we doing in terms of educating people? Five years between elections, what happens? Is there any discourse on democracy? Structures are there. We have to be happy that the media fraternity, CSOs, constitutional bodies, Parliament and other bodies are in place. The crux of the matter is the softer aspect of the democracy is what we have to be concerned about. I would also like to be optimistic.

Dr Tandi Dorji: I think, as Aum Neten said, since there are many students, it's like your parents have always been there, taking care of you, and then one day the parents say, I'm leaving now, you take care of yourself. So I think that's what happened in 2008, the realisation that now we have to take care of our own future.

And this really leads me to the question whether democracy is the best form of government. We were all convinced then in 2008 that we had the perfect government, why did we need to change? And today after 10 years, I am convinced that, perhaps democracy is not the best form of government, and I am further convinced because of a recent debate on BBC, where they were talking about the best form of government. And the debate was won by the person who said that benevolent dictatorship is the best form of government. And I truly believe that all these divisions that we have been talking about earlier... maybe a benevolent form of government that we had in the past was more suitable for us. Nevertheless, as Dasho said, we have to accept that democracy is here, and it is in the interests of all of us here to make it succeed.

Moderator: Going to Dasho Neten's presentation in the beginning, I was initially struck by the emphasis on divisive money politics, need of freedom from fear, etc.. But I think we've dealt with some of those issues in the discussion. So I'd like to ask the other three, starting with Aum Lily, Lyonpo Domcho and then Dr Tandi, what did you think about Dasho Neten's mask? What did it mean?

Aum Lily Wangchhuk: Actually, there is nothing wrong with democracy and politics. It's people who can either make it right or wrong. And I tend to believe, given the fact that it was introduced in a very unique matter, that we had every opportunity to make it a model democracy in the world. We could have learnt from the best practices from more advanced democracies, and we could have done away with a lot of demerits of democracy.

So right from the first elections back in 2008, somewhere, something has gone wrong and as a result, from the very first election alone, a lot of division has been created. And because democracy and politicians are always perceived with a negative connotation, given the fact that we are a small society, there can also be victimisation of supporters, especially if you are not elected. So I guess because of all that, I think most aspiring politicians are hiding behind a mask and not being able to reveal their true identities, especially on social media.

Lyonpo Domcho Dorji: Well it's really difficult for me to deduce much out of that. But I think the metaphor was that politicians do not tell the truth and that it is time that political parties and politicians face the reality, that the people need to know the truth, and that politics is not just about politics, but it is about laying the facts bare.

Dr Tandi Dorji: Please don't think that politicians are *atsaras*. But really I think the meaning was that we have a mask. And I think this is fuelled by the perception that, at least for me, politicians act one way before the elections, and after the elections they act in a very different way. And I think people think "Oh these guys just come here to get my vote. After that, maybe he will act differently". But for me personally, I would like to say that I still haven't had two faces or extra masks because I am yet to win an election. It's the same. So I wonder whether it will change, and also in our haste to get votes, I think it's important that we do not have different masks on ourselves.

Question 1: Students from Sherubtse College: Is democracy in Bhutan functioning like we expected and are we sacrificing our sovereignty and integrity in this process? (Moderator explains: I think the question is asking are we in any way compromising sovereignty and integrity in the process, comparing to the kind of democracy we have expected from the start?)

Dr Tandi Dorji: Dasho, I would like to begin, because this is very close to me. And as I said in my concluding remarks, I don't think we will compromise our sovereignty and integrity because, as I mentioned, our democracy is unique. We have the guidance of His Majesty The King and yes, we can do better. There are many ways by which we can improve the way our democracy is functioning. And one very good example is to have a common platform, such as this BDD, where we can solve problems and issues related to national interest, as Aum Lily just mentioned, about the role of the monarchy, about foreign relations. These are things that all parties must come together and form a common understanding, because we cannot compromise our security after we change our government every 5 years. Therefore there are certain issues that all political parties must come together and ensure that it is in the best interest of the country. So yes, there is room for improvement but I don't think that we will compromise our sovereignty and integrity.

Dasho Neten Zangmo: May I? Now we need to act. We have very strong laws. The Electoral laws are very strong — what to do, what not to do, the responsibility of the citizens. When a youth asks that question, I think that same question has to be asked of you. Definitely the political parties have a greater responsibility. In the end of December, we had an all-party conference where we said that we would sign a written pledge. Aum Lily, you were not there. But did we even sign that pledge? We did not. In fact, we asked for more observers. If we really follow the law, there is no need for any observer at all. We will be responsible citizens, whether in the form of a politician, a voter, or a youth.

So I think these questions, we have to ask ourselves — when you vote, what is your criteria? Is it because you want vouchers? Is it because you've been promised a job? And similarly, the politicians — everything is there, the only thing is the will not just to talk but also to act.

Aum Lily Wangchhuk: One observation the political parties made when we made a joint study visit to Denmark in 2014 was, when it comes to issues of national interest, political parties are greatly united. There is a great sense of solidarity. That was a good take-home for all of us, and from there the idea of Bhutan democracy was born. We agreed that when it comes to issues of common interests, we would work together using BDD as a platform. But unfortunately, there have been challenges within BDD, and we have not been able to achieve so far. But if we can use this platform as a cross-party mechanism, to have a common understanding of issues of national interests, I think a lot can be done in helping our effective functioning of our democracy and not at the cost of our national security and sovereignty. I would say our democracy is functioning well, but I think it could function better. Especially because we are a small country — and if there is political will and commitment, we can do far better.

Lyonpo Domcho Dorji: As my other colleagues said, democracy is bound to succeed in Bhutan because we have very strong institutions — democratic institutions — in place. We have very strong checks and balances in place, we have very strong laws in place and we have the full support of the people. Above all, we have a strong Bhutanese spirit of success and the guidance of His Majesty The King. I am very optimistic about the success of democracy in Bhutan, and through this success, our democracy will also be able to strengthen the sovereignty and security of our country.

Question 2: Tenzin Dorji, Media Studies Teacher from Early Learning Centre: How much have our students understood about democracy, their roles and responsibilities? How would you describe the state of citizenship, education amongst youth at this point, and what do you have to offer in order to improve that as well?

Dasho Neten Zangmo: Whenever we look at youth, we always look at our youth as problems, isn't it? Drug addiction, suicide, and so on. But I've engaged with the youth, whether it is in schools or even in my last two years in the village. So heart-warming. Even this time when I went to Tsirang and Dagana, a lot of youth are on the farm. And if youth — you were mentioning especially in citizenship, education — I think some sort of citizen education is there, isn't it? And this sort of education has to start from home.

Even when I talk to mothers, parents, I tell them don't distinguish between your daughter and son. Empower your daughter. Don't tell your daughter, you come and sweep and cook, and send your son out to play with a gun, but let the son also do chores at home. So I think this sort of education, whether it is citizenship or whatever, from childhood, is also the responsibility of the parents. So let's not look at the parties, what do you have to offer? Let's see how can we engage: Is there a space for youth to engage? There's a Youth Parliament Democracy. How are we engaging there? And if the Youth Parliament is emulating the Parliament, you better think twice. So I think we need to create the space.

Dr Tandi Dorji: If I may share my views. When we talk about empowering youth, I think it's very important in a democracy to fulfil the aspirations of youth themselves. And by that I think there needs to be an opportunity for them, better opportunities, and to have a future that they can look forward to. And the activities such as Youth Parliament, at least in terms of democracy, have been very good. I think it's taking up across the country and they will play a better part in strengthening democracy. As His Majesty The Third King once said, that he wished for a brighter future during his son's time. Therefore all of us, we hope the democracy in the future, in our youths' time, will be much better than today.

Aum Lily Wangchuk: Back in 2006 when I was working for the UN in Bhutan, one of my findings was in countries where civic education had been done before the introduction of democracy, democracy had worked really well. And in countries where not adequate civic education had been carried out, there have been challenges. So considering the fact that, on behalf of the UN, I have really put this recommendation across to the Election Commission of Bhutan, but unfortunately, the focus has been largely on voter education and not on civic education.

And I think one of the challenges that we are having in our country, especially the relationships that have been affected over the political choice, because in more advanced democracies, husband and wife can be in two different political parties and still be okay with that. So one of the biggest challenges we have in our democracy today is we have not carried out adequate civic education in our country, and we still haven't done anything about it in the last 10 years.

So when it comes to voter education and students... I think this is... I believe the Election Commission has initiated a Bhutan Children's Parliament and the democracy forums in schools, but I'm not sure how active and effective is that, but the fact is, forget about our citizens, even our students have not had the opportunity to get educated on the essence of democracy. On the other hand, political parties and aspiring politicians have no opportunity to interact even with students. So if it was not for a forum like the Bhutan Democracy Forum, there wouldn't have been any other forum where we could have this cross-discussions of ideas.

Lyonpo Damcho Dorji: It would be an understatement to say that our youth are not aware of the democratic process or that they are not aware of their rights under the Constitution. I think within the last 10 years, a lot of work has gone into creating awareness, not just among the educated lot but among the electorate as well. A lot of work is being done by the Election Commission and by the schools, and of course the media. Therefore, especially in this age of technology where information is available at your fingertips, our youth have displayed a lot of interest in knowing what is happening around them. It is only a matter of time that I think our youth will become fully conscious of their roles in democracy, of their rights under the Constitution and at the same time, play a very constructive role in building our nation.

Question 3: Question from Overseas: Whose responsibility is it to educate people at the grassroots level amongst the electorate to unite rather than resort to divisive politics?

Aum Lily Wangchhuk: I think civic education across the country has to be carried out by an organisation that's neutral. It's not the responsibility of the Election Commission or the political parties. There has to be a neutral CSO that can effectively carry out civic education across all sectors.

Dasho Neten Zangmo: I just want to respond to the youth. I think it comes back to education when you talk about students understanding democracy and the youth's voice in democracy. If it can be integrated into the education itself, the voice of the student, whether class is going on, if he disagrees with the teacher, the ownership of the environment, our environment, the understanding of independence — I think it goes back to education. We can have wonderful school buildings but what goes on in the classrooms, that is important, that's quite central.

The education of electorate is everybody's responsibility. First of all, I would like to go back to the statement that I made about a gup whom I found was perhaps one of the most enlightened public servants in my eleven months of political life. He said the problem created in the field, the divisive force, is actually the party apparatus at the grassroots. At the end of the day, why do you need the party apparatus? To mobilise a crowd for meetings? Why can't the local government do that? How can we really say that the local government is apolitical, just as Dr Tandi was saying when all the resources are at the disposal of the government and the opposition.... the other parties, just because they are not in the Parliament, the level playing field is not there. So even that suggestion is there. So at the end of the day, the education of the electorate, whether it is in the form of a party apparatus, whether it is in the form of voters, or children, I think the responsibility of educating lies with everybody.

The Dzongdas. What are they doing about it? Apolitical — at a distance? No. I think that we really need to re-define apoliticalness of these institutions. Gup for example, they can do a lot, teachers, political parties, have a big responsibility. And of course most importantly the Election Commission of Bhutan — they just cannot issue orders saying, you can do this, you can... I find it very obnoxious when somebody says that you can have gatherings but no political parties. Are we with horns? Why do we become different when we become a politician? Are we so contagious? Do we have contagious diseases?

So this outlook, this attitude has to change. With so many nos, don't do this, don't do that, dzongdas don't come to us, gups of course. I think for me is very fundamental, education has to be everybody's duty, of course most importantly institutions, and we cannot wait for what happens between elections. We must continue to have such discourses, big and small. We have to be enlightened about democracy.

Moderator: Actually, the next question was on being apolitical and what it means. We'll have that question, but then since we've heard Dasho Neten's view, we'll ask the other three in the next round.

Dr Tandi Dorji: Actually I really wanted to start from that. What is really apolitical? We are talking about the gups at the local government. They were doing elections far before democracy was introduced. Gups were being elected at the gewog level. They are much more knowledgeable about the election process and who to pick as a candidate. I think the fundamental problem lies in keeping the local government apolitical. There is no incentive for any person in the village to be a member of a political party because that person then becomes discarded from the local government. He cannot stand for election to the gup or mangmi or a tshogpa. They become active only during the election year. Therefore for political parties to have grassroots presence, it is very difficult with the present set-up.

So should we change? Should we make political participation possible at the local level? Should gups be members of political parties? Those are experiences that we need to perhaps study over the next few elections. Because that brings another question, is it time to change our electoral laws? Should we amend the Constitution? We've had only 10 years. So basically it is all our responsibility to educate people at the grassroots.

Moderator: And since the force of thought has taken us to the apolitical scene, if anyone has a brief comment including the civil servants. We were talking about civil servants being the largest body of educated people here. And they are supposed to be apolitical and are interpreted or misinterpreted as saying that civil servants cannot talk at all. So that is also worth hearing some comments on.

Lyonpo Damcho Dorji: There has been a lot of debate during the drafting of the Constitution on this concept of being apolitical. Well, political parties were a necessary evil in a democratic system. There was also the fear of politicising all other institutions, including the local government and civil service. And, therefore, there was a sort of a compromise that in order to have an efficient check, in order to separate politics from neutrality, we have created a lot of apolitical institutions, like the National Council, the local governments, and civil servants, which basically means that there are a lot of benefits and meritocracy in having apolitical institutions and apolitical bodies which will then act as a check and balance on the political parties. So this was a compromise between whether we should have political affiliation in all the institutions or whether there should be a clear and distinct boundary between political parties and apolitical institutions.

Aum Lily Wangchhuk: On one hand, democracy is a gift, and on the other hand, institutions have made a very narrow interpretation of "apolitical". Because of this, one would understand that apolitical would mean not being affiliated and associated with a political party. But here we have a very narrow definition, in the sense that aspiring politicians and political parties are not allowed to have any interaction with students, civil servants, and the educated lot because the educated lot are working with different institutions.

So especially during campaign, the only people we get to interact with are rural voters. So the urban civil servants, the educated lot, are supposed to make their choice based on media coverage, and if the media coverage is biased, it can highly influence your political choices as well. I think there is already a challenge there. Similarly, political parties are there to be the voice of the people. In their manifestoes they are supposed to have consultation with people and take the aspirations and voices of people forward, but we have no opportunity to interact with the people. So, because of that, it isolates political parties and aspiring politicians. Wherever we go, we are looked upon with a lot of suspicion and mistrust, as if we are there to pursue our own political agenda, and we're not there for the right reasons. And I think this is one of the main reasons — which Dasho Neten also pointed out — why some people have to be under the mask. We cannot be ourselves.

Dasho Neten Zangmo: Democracy of the people, by the people, for the people — right now, I think ours is turning into democracy for the political party, by the political party, of the political party, because everybody's apolitical. At the end of the day, local government is highly politicised. I think we should not be in that environment of do's and don'ts. If we can build trust....that's why I think trust is so important. That confidence is so important. Perhaps, we'll be more professional.

Let's take that example of what Dasho Kinley mentioned about civil servants being apolitical. If we work in an environment, build that trust and confidence. I'm sure the civil servants....because at the end of the day, civil service is the pool that all the political parties will also fish their candidates from. But if you have that trust and confidence, that professionalism... the civil servants, once they decide to join, they must have the moral duty to resign. And I think civil servants have to engage. They cannot say that I'm going to join and wait until June, July. So again, let's not be governed by do's and don'ts. When you're governed by do's and don'ts, that's why you have to wear masks....not only the political parties. Otherwise our democracy will be democracy for the party, by the party, of the party.

Moderator: **The growing gap between the rich and the poor is a national concern. What measures should we take and the idea is — from another question I'm bringing this quote — to avoid creating a poor country with rich people. The growing gap between the rich and the poor.**

Dr Tandi Dorji: I would like to say that for our party at least, this is at the forefront of our priorities that you need. I think that there are many things that can be done. We have not addressed this very effectively over the last two elections. I always say that there are two main reasons why this gap is increasing. One is creating equal opportunities....not only creating more opportunities, but more opportunities for those who are at the bottom. And the second one is on policies and plans adopted by the government. It must be focused for those who are left behind. If the policies and programmes are for the rich, then this gap is only going to widen. And I hope that, in the coming elections, all of you will be excited to see what we have planned to narrow this gap situation.

Dasho Neten Zangmo: I think long ago we had this balanced regional development. If we can really focus on that... and the other thing is of course policies, investments, resources like capital availability for sections of citizens, and I think balanced regional development has to be there. The other thing is empowerment, citizens' voice. I think that is important. Again, the space for a citizen's voice. Accountability for example.... I think these are things that we need to promote and create the space. Whoever comes into power... or it is the local government.... seek opportunities, engage the citizens where there are opportunities?

I think we need to build opportunities and I'm sure the citizens have a lot of ideas. For example, people want to invest in small investments but look at the services. I remember my friend wanted to

make an investment.... he would have benefitted, plus he would have also created jobs.... but these clearances that you have to have.... six months no clearance, one year no clearance, after some time you give up. So if you can really help in terms of making our service delivery more effective....I know the successive government has been working, but perhaps, not hard enough.

Aum Lily Wangchhuk: The challenge in our country is not only income, but also development gap, gender gap, and generation gap. And I believe our nation can truly progress if our citizens are empowered. So our party's ideology is centred on equity and justice. It's also focused on intervention to address the gaps at all levels: Income, development, gender, and generation. And coming up with special temporary measures and interventions especially for those left behind, so that they can be genuinely and sustainably, accessed.

Question: How do we avoid becoming over-dependent on one neighbour for economic growth?

Dasho Neten Zangmo: Over 60 percent of our development fund coming from one source is perhaps unhealthy. As citizens, we have to look at it.

Aum Lily Wangchhuk: We declared self-reliance as a goal 30 years ago, but today we are not any closer. We have rather become more dependent on aid than we ever were. The answer would be trade and not aid. As a small nation, our biggest asset is human resource, and the country must invest in human resource development and capitalise on it. For sustainable development, the country would need adequate foreign reserves, and to increase the foreign reserve, there is a need to step up on local action. The country must focus on reducing import by increasing export. Coming up with sustainable policies and plans is key to sustainability.

Dr Tandi Dorji: We have come thus far with support from our neighbour, India, and we will continue to have this relationship. While it may not be healthy in the long-term, we must also accept our geopolitical reality — we are a landlocked country. On three sides is India, on the other side is China where the border is closed. Every Bhutanese must be aware of the geopolitical reality. As we move on, deliberations must be held on this issue, and find avenues — as we graduate to a middle-income country — to find other avenues of funds and strengthen self-reliance to meet expenses from our own revenues.

Moderator: This one is quite a pointed question to political parties. It's coming back to divisive politics. What can the parties do to unite themselves and unite a society? I'm combining two questions here, to avoid divisive politics, what initiatives can parties take?

Dasho Neten Zangmo: What can the political parties do? We can do a lot of things. We can work together. Maybe we should remove the party apparatus and the local government help facilitate all the parties on the same platform with the same disposition in mobilising the crowd. Because I think it is the party apparatus....but what sort of instruction comes from the leadership? I think that is also important because I have also heard in the past: "Oh we do not know what happens on the ground." I think that's a lie.

And we can work together. For example, recently we were out in the field ... DNT was also there. I heard that three parties, the candidates are moving around together, how wonderful. "You have different things to say? It's okay." But it was such a wonderful example and I think we should do more of that. Even our discussions, the Bhutan Democracy Dialogue, there must be a spirit of solidarity. At the end of the day, we are choices that we are offering to the people, can we work together? Challenges that we face are common to us. Can we discuss about it together? I think so. And the

leadership....I think it's so important that the leadership has to very clearly instruct down the line that they should not be worried about losing votes, even though you have to remove a very influential coordinator, just because he or she is being impressive. We should have the courage to remove him.

Dr Tandi Dorji: To wish for no division at all when there are political parties is a little far-fetched. It is inevitable that people will be divided along party lines. It is inevitable, right here today there are people leaning to one of these parties. It is inevitable. What is important is after the elections – the parties that are forming the government have the greater responsibility. To discriminate between people as your party supporter and other party's supporter even after the election – this is unacceptable.

And that's why I always feel that the parties that win the elections – they have a greater responsibility to bring unity and harmony after the elections – to tell people that we are Bhutanese and that all plans and programmes are for the larger interests of the country. This is everyone's responsibility irrespective of what party you support.

Moderator: Thank you very much Doctor. We did introduce our speakers as party representatives. We have four parties represented here, and if we didn't know where they came from, I think the dialogue didn't show any divisions at all.

Aum Lily Wangchhuck: I would say firstly we'll need to carry out adequate civic education so that, while a certain amount of division is inevitable, people are not largely divided because of the political differences, so civic education, educating people on the essence of democracy, is the key.

What would also help is if the political parties agree to stay away from divisive politics and commit themselves to compete only on ideas and competence of candidates. And as proposed earlier today, signing a commitment pledge where disputes and non-compliance can be resolved through inter-party mechanism, through multiparty committee, through BDD. And I think the most important part is the will and political commitment of all party leaders to safeguard and nurture our democracy so that we are able to shape our democracy, make that into a model democracy in the world and fulfil His Majesty The King's vision for this country and the world.

Lastly, as Doctor pointed out, victimisation and differentiation of people after the elections does more harm. Once the election is over, leaders should conduct themselves in a manner like they are leaders of an entire country, not just for certain political parties. There should be no differentiation, and between elections, we should put in a lot more effort. And BDD would be an ideal platform in strengthening our unity and our solidarity and working towards a more harmonious political environment.

Lyonpo Damcho Dorji: I think it is very important for all political parties before and after the elections to keep the long-term interests of the people at heart. While, as Lily said, it is inevitable that certain division of opinion will be there — which is healthy for a democracy — parties should encourage themselves so that there is a great understanding of what the national priorities are.

And, after the election is over, there has to be a vigorous healing process where the party leaders can play a constructive role. Well, in the case of the People's Democratic Party in the elections of 2013, we have made concerted efforts to heal the divisions that were created during the elections. Even after the elections, and until now, we have always made concerted efforts to ensure that the government treats every citizen as equals and not as party supporters or as supporters of other parties, so this has been on the mind of the government, mainly because politics creates division amongst the people and disharmony.

Moderator: I think the democratic term is that we all agree to disagree. I think we can sense that. I'm not going to sum up this discussion. I think it is better that we leave this place with hundreds of questions to be asked and with the enthusiasm to continue this discourse. The last comments I would request from our speakers.... we have two very strong groups here — the role of civil society and the media group. So the role of civil society and media in democratic governance. So as the last comments, may I request the four speakers to comment on this?

Dr Tandi Dorji: Both the civil society and the media are critical components of the democratic process. What is heartening is that numbers of civil society organisations have increased tremendously. However, in the area of democracy, I think there is limited number of players who are actively involved in the democratic process. And as Aum Lily also pointed out, I think it is also important that we have, for example the BCMD, and we have other CSOs that help to organise such forums, that bring political parties and civil servants, students, all together where we have this kind of discourse to further strengthen our democracy.

On the media — absolutely important for our democratic process. Unfortunately they have not had the progress that we all expected. Again, we all know the realities that are faced by the media in terms of finances and sustainability of the media itself, being a very small country and having a very small number of resources from which they can access funds. But it is important that any government that comes to the power supports and helps CSOs and the media to improve and get better.

Dasho Neten Zangmo: I've worked in a CSO, and I know the potential CSOs have in strengthening democracy, whether it is in governance, whether it is in people's voice or whether it is in developmental activities. But how much of space do CSOs have? While we have documents and speeches, how much actual engagement is there? There are about forty civil societies, and how are we engaging them and do we have the space? I think that is important even in terms of resources, can we also outsource some of our activities, whether it is in civic education, democracy? Can we also outsource some of our activities to the CSOs and some of CSOs have done such wonderful jobs, so thank you very much. In fact, I also believe that politics is a very big CSO.

Media, I would like to be politically correct in saying that sustainability of media fraternity, the fourth or the fifth state of democracy.... but I would like to ask the media fraternity, how independent are you? Are you also one of the sources of division? How independent are you also in encouraging, stirring, constructive public discourse? I would like to ask this question to the media. Sustainability is fine but what role — how independent are you?

Aum Lily Wangchhuck: There is no doubt that the roles of CSOs and the media are crucial to ensure the success to our democracy. Your integrity is a strong measure of the health of our democracy. And CSOs and the media are very much a part of the political process. Democracy is not made up of politicians and political parties alone; you are very much a part of the political process. And you are important voices of people, and I think because political parties and aspiring politicians don't get opportunities to interact with people. You can be the very strong and powerful media to carry forward the voices of people, and to engage in more dialogue with political parties so we can carry the hopes, aspirations and challenges of the people forward in our respective party policies and manifestos and programmes.

Before I touch on media....earlier on, I mentioned that civic education is best addressed by CSOs, and the reason why I say that is international practices have proven that if civic education is carried out by political parties, it can be largely politicised....and not even the Election Commission. So the

international best practices say that CSOs, which are neutral, can play an effective role in carrying out effective civic education. And I think that could also be a food for thought for CSOs. Media has a very important role to play. Having worked with media, during my term with BMF, I'm aware of that you do work under a lot of challenges, you do work under a lot of constraints, but having said that, you can play a key role in ensuring the success of our media by reporting in a free and fair manner, free from fear.

Lyonpo Damcho Dorji: Well, there's no doubt that media as the fourth pillar of democracy has a very important role to play in a democratic set-up. So it has a very crucial role in shaping a very healthy democracy, because it acts as an interface between the people and the government. And it also acts as a general communication that helps to guard public interest. However, the media must also be careful and move away from adversarial politics. Media must also refrain from reporting people as helpless victims of the state and the political institution.

Moving on to civil society....again, civil society is a mechanism to limit control and the power of state, but on the other hand, the civil society can also promote political participation. They can also help to develop other areas of democratic life such as tolerance and compromise. And above all, they can complement the government in its efforts at the local level, both in terms of implementation of policies and programmes. And at the national level, they can be involved in the policy-making decision.

Question: What is being done to improve the inclusivity of section of the specially-abled persons?

Lyonpo Damcho Dorji: Lots of deliberations and assessments were carried out at different levels to bring about change in our system, including the infrastructures to be more disabled-friendly. Studies were done in health and education to understand the needs of the specially-abled persons, following the recommendations from the Cabinet. Accordingly, plans and programmes have been included in the 12th five-year plan. Based on the advanced understanding of the needs of specially-abled, plans to construct six special-needs school have been included in the plan (Summary).

Dr Tandi Dorji: Every party would have their own plans to promote a more inclusive society for specially-abled persons (Summary).

Moderator: And today, to our international friends here, and also our Bhutanese friends who represent international organisations, I want to say thank you very much. Please keep working with us. Bhutan is a very cautious country — not telling us what to do but working with us, that is very much appreciated. Thank you very much to the international community.