

BHUTAN DEMOCRACY FORUM 2021

Being Apolitical in Democratic Bhutan



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BHUTAN CENTRE
for MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY



Bhutan Democracy Forum

March 2021

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BHUTAN CENTRE
for MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

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Bhutan Democracy Forum 2021

Being Apolitical in Democratic Bhutan

A Transcript

Chencho Lhamu, Executive Director, Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy (BCMD):

Forums can be seen as an intellectual exercise, but they also serve as productive forces that shape our thoughts, ideas, beliefs and values. And what we think, believe and value influences our behaviours and actions.

In this digital age, we are swamped by global narratives and ideologies the minute we log on to the world wide web or turn on the television. In this vast sea of information, what is Bhutan's story of democracy and its state of affairs?

The opportunity to carve out a democracy of our own cultural liking and relevance is only possible if we share our narratives, engage in deliberation, out of which emerges collective knowledge, meaning and wisdom that inheres the potential to influence practices.

Premised thus, Bhutan Democracy Forum was conceptualised with the aim of creating an interactive, open and safe space for different actors in Bhutan's democratic landscape to deliberate on and deepen our understanding of pertinent issues with the overarching goal of strengthening the foundations of democracy.

In the past, we have organised forums on the state of Bhutan's democracy, and democracy as a path to good governance with panellists from different political parties including non-political actors like the National Council, media, academia and the local government.

On behalf of the Royal University of Bhutan and BCMD, it is my pleasure to welcome all to the forum on "Being Apolitical in Democratic Bhutan".

Our moderator for today's session needs no introduction. But nevertheless, Dasho Kinley Dorji is the Editor of Druk Journal -- a biannual publication of BCMD and he has worked in the Bhutanese media for over three decades and has served as the editor-in-chief of the national newspaper -- Kuensel. Dasho retired, not long ago, as the Secretary of the Ministry of Information and Communications.

Once again, welcome to the forum and hope everyone will enjoy the session and we look forward to an interactive and constructive discussion.

Kadrinchey la.

Dasho Kinley Dorji, Moderator:

This is going to be a very informal session. We are not calling it a discussion, there are no lectures, we are going to call this a conversation. We are undergoing a historical and political transformation; some people call us a young democracy, new democracy, small democracy, but I think, in this context, we should see ourselves as a learning democracy -- learning to learn.

Today we are going to have a very apolitical conversation on the topic 'Being Apolitical'. We have a society with a multi-party system without very visible ideologies and political parties. So the idea of the conversation is that we understand this very important aspect of democracy function, the important value of democracy -- being apolitical.

My understanding of apolitical, in many ways, is a state of mind -- talking about being politically neutral and being fair. But in our small society with the multi-party system, it's taken on a different meaning. So that's what we would like to look at. For the conversation, we are going to look at the issues, but more importantly, we'll try and look at the way forward and solutions. What do we do from here to understand the evolution of a political system?

To briefly introduce the speakers, we have Tashi Dema, an Assignment Editor for Kuensel; we have Dasho Karma Tshiteem, Former Chair of the Royal Civil Service Commission; we have Dasho Sangay Khandu whose political career is as old as the Bhutanese democracy as he was among the first batch to stand for elections; we have Attorney General, Dasho Lungten Dubgyur; and then we have, Ms. Tan Lian Choo from Singapore joining us via Zoom, she is the international expertise. We want to bounce ideas so we want to involve international ideas in this conversation. Tan Lian Choo knows Bhutan and the world very well. She was a veteran journalist for many years, then advisor and coordinator of media for the Singapore government, then a diplomat for many years. Now, I personally see her as someone who knows what's going on. To me, that is the best credential one can have these days. So we welcome Tan Lian Choo from Singapore.



Tashi Dema, Assignment Editor, Kuensel

Tashi Dema:

Kuzu Zangpo everyone, good morning. I will basically talk about how this requirement and need for our public servants, especially civil servants, Local Government (LG) members, National Council (NC), and civil society organisations and other organisations to remain apolitical effects or hampers the media in fulfilling our role to inform the nation.

Why does the media need public servants? For the media, public servants, especially those in the civil service are the professionals; they have the technical expertise and they have the information. So the media needs them to explain to us how certain policies, plans and activities would be of larger interest to the country or would not succeed. But because of this need for them to remain apolitical, it is interpreted as not being allowed to talk so they do not talk to us openly. Today if I want to do a story, our public servants will only talk to the media if it puts their company, ministry, department or divisions in a very good light. If there is a government policy and I approach an NC member and say “Dasho, what is your opinion on this?”, they would say “I am apolitical and I am not supposed to talk about this”. So what happens in such a situation? We have to convince these sources and we have to tell them “Please give me the information”. We have to literally beg and say “I’ll keep you anonymous, I will not name you as my source, I’ll just say a source”. So what happens then? Then the credibility of our particular story is lost. A lot of people then question us, “What is this story from Kuensel? You say a source, this person, that person and use no names”. Then they think that the media cooked up the story. So even if the information is right, without a credible source, it is very difficult.

It is especially very difficult during the elections. If a particular party pledges free Wi-Fi to all and as media, if we want to do a story, we want to know whether that is doable and whether that pledge is achievable. We would want people from the Ministry of Information and Communications to talk to us and say, "This is how it's achievable and this is how it is not achievable". We would like to talk to officials from the Department of Information Technology and Telecom but if you approach them, they will always say, "We are apolitical. We cannot give any comments".

Very recently, I was doing this analysis of the Bumthang bye-elections on who is likely to win. I quoted a local leader saying, "It is not going to be an easy win for the other candidates. It is not just about their capability, there are many other factors." A day after the story was published, I received a call from the Election Commission of Bhutan's (ECB) media arbitrator who asked me who my source was. Before I could say I cannot reveal my source or I need source protection, she asked me, "Is it a serving local leader or a former local leader?" And she reminded me that a serving local leader is not supposed to talk to the media because he or she was supposed to remain apolitical. I had to protect my source, so I said it is a former local leader. Two days after the call, I received a long letter from ECB's media arbitrator. They had issues with me not stating that it was a former local leader and with my vote prediction. Luckily, I did not cite my source as a public servant or a civil servant. I just said source X or Y, so that person was saved. We also had senior ECB officials walking into Kuensel and they had an issue with us doing a story on the three Thrompens and their intention to recontest. For the media, that is a story. We thought people should know why they want to recontest but ECB officials had their own reason. From the media's side, if we do not do the story, who will do it? How will people know? This limits the public discourse. When the media cannot write, then people will not know and there is no engagement from the public. If the media can write and report and if public servants are free to talk, then I think it will divert people's attention from social media posts and fake accounts.

The problem right now is that Bhutan's mainstream media's role has become that of authenticating fake accounts on social media. When there is no discussion, when people do not talk about democracy and when people do not talk about issues then it limits the discussion on democracy. As Dasho said, we are all learning and keeping in mind the cliched statement, "Media is young and democracy is also young", let us learn from these experiences.



Dasho Karma Tshiteem, Former Chairman, Royal Civil Service Commission

Dasho Karma Tshiteem:

I will try to make three points. Firstly, what it really means to be apolitical -- I think not talking or talking to media may be one aspect of it but also in terms of what is actually there in the civil service system. Secondly, highlighting apolitical in terms of more common speak, and thirdly, make a case about why having apolitical institutions are critical for strong vibrant democracies that we are all aiming for. When it comes to what it means to be apolitical, it is mentioned once in our constitution, four times in the Civil Service Act of Bhutan and very explicit provisions are there in the Civil Service Rules and Regulations. The conversation does not have to be about the opinions of people. It is actually quite explicit. What it says in section 3.3.5 is:

A civil servant shall be apolitical, nonpartisan and not stand for election under electoral laws of the Kingdom. Any communication relayed by a civil servant in support or opposition of a political party or a candidate shall be treated as political advertising and in direct violation of civil service values and conduct if so alleged and proven. And further, our code of conduct is very explicit.

It says, a civil servant shall:

1. Remain and uphold the political neutrality of the civil service at all times.
2. Provide forthright and impartial advice to the government.
3. Speak truth to power.
4. Discharge official duties without fear and favour.
5. Institute a fair and transparent system with proper documentation to ensure that decision making is not politicised.

Further, it goes on to say, a civil servant shall not:

1. Be a candidate for any election conducted under the electoral laws.
2. Canvas for a political party or a candidate.
3. Attend political party meetings and support or carry out such activities
4. Express any opinion on politics or political parties either explicitly or implicitly.
5. Perform or neglect his duty based on his political view.
6. Impose or influence another person's or group's political views.
7. Indulge in any communication via telephonic means including individual, or bulk SMS, internet, social media etc.
8. Make contributions or fund any election campaign in favour of or against a candidate or a political party.

Now, if I summarise that, what it means is civil servants at all times should have the ability to tell political leaders, whichever government is in power, what they need to hear even if it is not what they want to hear. Having done that, whatever the decisions the government of the day takes, it is the job of civil servants to implement those decisions as long as they are legal.

The second is to provide the best advice to elected governments irrespective of or in spite of personal political preferences. The third is to ensure that the advice is from the institution with the benefit of institutional memory and the professional expertise of people and not their personal opinions. And fourth is to ensure that all our laws, policies, rules and regulations are implemented without fear or favour so that we can uphold the good governance principles of efficacy, transparency and accountability.

Finally, if I may say, why is it important for civil servants or institutions to be apolitical? They become the main foundation. Why? Because all administration is carried out by the institutions of the civil service. And therefore, if they are able to remain apolitical since, by design, they are more permanent, they can ensure that irrespective of political leadership, national interest is always protected and promoted. So, this is extremely important to bear in mind when we have the conversation around why institutions, in particular like the civil service and the Judiciary, must be apolitical.

Thank you.



Sangay Khandu, Co-founder and Associate, Center for Local Governance and Research

Sangay Khandu:

So in 2008, when our journey began, I remember us discussing the Constitution, the election laws and also the respective house laws in the National Assembly Act and the National Council Act. We debated the issue of political affiliation and being apolitical. What did it actually mean? Many people had different views and perspectives. I think the bottom line was that defining what was to be understood as being apolitical at that point in time was a bit overwhelming because it was still really very new for us. But we all came to a consensus at the end of the debate that so long as you register yourself with a political party, you would be political and if you do not register yourself as a member of a certain political party, you are apolitical. From that, I think the basis sort of flowed down. When Dasho Karma mentioned that a civil servant cannot run for office or cannot canvas for a candidate or a political party -- I think precisely that flows down from there. So within the governance in parliament, we have the National Assembly and the National Council. The National Assembly Act itself does not refer too much to this apolitical view. The National Council Act actually has two provisions that talk about being nonpartisan and being an apolitical institution. Prior to the elections in 2008, we had mock elections. As a National Council candidate, my experience was that when we went out for the first round of the national elections, a lot of the constituents would say, "*Ngachey dari tshaktu na lu mi joe. Naba nangsey ngomba di na lu jo ni in*" (We will not go to this election, we will go to the real one next time). So there was a reference to the National Assembly election as being the real election and that sort of implied that the National Council election was not a real one. I link that to the fact that the National Council was projected as an apolitical house and it was also seen as the house that just worked on laws and did not provide any developmental activities. So a lot of the rural constituents and voters

actually saw that the National Council made laws but did not necessarily bring roads or amenities and therefore by definition or reference, the National Council was not really important.

Second, in the first and second elections, as a National Council candidate, when you went out, a lot of the people were okay for you to come to their house and talk to them. But we hear from our colleagues in the other house that when political party candidates come, the supporters would openly welcome you to their homes and provide you whatever support they need. But if they did not support you, they would shut their door and not even let you in. But in the last few elections, I think that things have improved. People are more amicable to sitting down with whatever shade of political colour or representation that may be there. However, increasingly, there is also a sense that if you identify yourself with a certain political party and if they do not come to power, then you might not be in the good books and, therefore, you might lose out on certain privileges -- such as quicker access to government and the ministers and any of kind of support that may be possible. From that perspective, I think apolitical has been stretched in the sense that some of the voters probably feel that remaining apolitical means not really declaring your support openly for a candidate or political party.

Tashi from Kuensel talked about access to information and in the beginning, we also had a lot of difficulties, even as a serving parliamentarian in the National Council to get access to information. One of the experiences was when we had a gap in communication when the second government tried to bring in the right to information legislation. So access to information is not really just limited to the journalists, but you also see that within the parliament, parliamentarians also struggle to have access to information. In there, I think we have been lucky to have successively good parliamentary leadership and there have been improvements in terms of sharing information with the government. But I think there is a long way to go even though we have made a lot of progress.

In terms of politics, there is a lot of fake news and I think the credibility of mainstream media has been questioned many times. Because we are an old society and rumour works very well, and also because partisan politics, as we have seen in the West, can garner a lot of votes for elections, this seems to be a very dangerous mix. Without strong media and the involvement of academia and commentators, debates are becoming very subjective. If one was to share an opinion, and a lot of times this happens without enough research, it seems to be easily called political depending on the convenience. So somebody might say you are politicising the issue, which is not a bad thing because you are trying to highlight the issues so that it is debated. But then, it can be easily said that you are supposed to be

apolitical, therefore, you cannot raise it. For example, in my experience in the National Council, when the National Council raises issues that are of national importance, we have had successive governments call the National Council the default opposition. This has even come out in the media. When it does not suit the convenience of the government, sometimes even the National Council, which actually takes an apolitical stance, is also labelled as being very political and by default, the opposition. I think there is a need to define and give a clear definition of what it means to be apolitical as opposed to how the civil service rules are because I think the other areas are still not well defined. We are still stuck with the idea that so long as you are not registered with a political party, you are apolitical. That is one area, but the other area is that whenever you say something that might actually make sense, it gives the people in positions of authority to quickly call it political, biased, non-neutral and therefore, discredit the information by saying “Since you’re supposed to be apolitical, whatever you say violates the rules and codes”.



Lungten Dubgyur, Attorney General, Office of the Attorney General

Lungten Dubgyur:

I would like to really touch on the basic idea of structural democracy that we have adopted -- an apolitical civil service -- which supports the three arms of the government. In a democratic function, the separation of powers is very important, and, therefore, we term it as a horizontal check-and-balance where we have an equal level playing field in terms of law-making, interpretation by the courts and execution of the laws and policies by the executive government led by the Prime Minister. Therefore, in terms of this design and idea, we should have a structure of a vertical check-and-balance. Dasho Sangay has pointed out why the National Council needs to be apolitical. The vertical check-and-balance in the National Assembly is that the government of the day has a majority so they vote on bills, laws and legislation. Therefore, to have a check-and-balance and to ensure it is not unconstitutional, the very design of the National Council as an apolitical institution was very desirable.

We have seen the changes within the government in the last 14 years as our constitution transitioned. We have learned to survive and to experience the political culture where the cabinets have changed three times and our civil servants have remained apolitical. Like Dasho Karma's stance and what Tashi pointed out, chances of becoming a politicised civil servant is a tension I see here. What we ensure is that right from the Secretaries down to the Ministries, civil servants are bound by our legislation. But at the same time, the political masters -- the parties who won the election -- are mandated to fulfil the obligations, policies and manifestos they have taken. Next is political morality and political correctness -- once the government is elected, it should be the government of the people of Bhutan. There should not be any hinges or interference or non-interference in

terms of political decisions that civil servants should be worried about when they execute their functions in accordance with the law.

Attorney General (AG) is actually the advisor to the government and to the state. My duty as an AG is to ensure that laws are followed, as it is of civil servants down the line. So you have to be very clear in terms of our roles in a transitional democracy and the Constitutional design that we are supposed to be bound by. We are the balance between the political institution in a democracy and providing independent, fair, transparent and equal administration of justice to the people.

His Majesty the Fourth King says that the civil service needs to be apolitical to support the government, to make it functional and also to ensure that civil servants provide a continuum of services during election cycles so that there is confidence from our people that there is a free and fair election being conducted. I think the design is very good, we have the best of the Constitution, if not the best. We have gone through all the structural research behind it and that is why we can look forward to a vibrant and functional democracy.



Tan Lian Choo, Senior Consultant and Trainer, Potential Project

Tan Lian Choo

Thank you Kinley for giving me the floor. The fact that you have gathered such eminent speakers from key branches of the government and the strong media presence here today, are certainly hallmarks of vibrant democracy at work in Bhutan. Let me begin by stating that each country determines what is best in its own national interest. Therefore, my comments here today are made in the spirit of food-for-thought. They are not meant at all to advocate any particular mode or practice that we have in Singapore. So the question you may ask is, how do we understand democracy in Singapore? There is really no simple answer but the fact is that the People's Action Party (PAP), which has governed Singapore since independence in 1965, has been given mandate after mandate by voters, after each general election, to continue governing each time after it delivered on its electoral campaign promises. We know that behind any success is a lot of hard work and commitment so the PAP's political longevity in Singapore, even its critics will acknowledge, has to do with its ability to deliver better and better living standards for successive generations of Singaporeans -- better housing, better health care, better education, better transport facilities, jobs, etc.

This brings me to the crux of our discussion. What does it mean to be apolitical in the public service for us in Singapore? The Singaporean government succeeds in its endeavours largely through ensuring the integrity, competence and commitment of the public sector to carry out its political, economic and social agenda. So public servants are subject to the rules established by the public service division and they must serve the legitimately elected government of the day. Civil servants who are part of the public sector, there are 86,000 strong, must remain apolitical and this means that they should not be affiliated with any

political party and to stand for election under a political party affiliation, the individual must necessarily resign from the civil service.

Let me say a bit more on what we understand by being apolitical. It does not mean that the civil servants will not talk or argue on their own to take positions, one different from the other, in front of their respective government ministers. They do have their own political attitudes and biases for certain policy implementations. After all, it is in the role of the civil servant to work with and for political leaders in a political environment and yet maintain a detachment from politics. There is always a fine balance between being neutral and non-political and between a civil service that is politically sensitive and responsive. So in Singapore, civil servants have to be politically impartial and not campaign for or against any political party and definitely should not misuse state resources or powers for partisan political purposes. But this does not mean that civil servants, especially senior ones, should shy away from carrying out their duties when a matter proves to be politically controversial.

Once internal discussions have taken place within government and political decisions are taken, the civil servants are expected to implement policy decisions and this often involves engaging the media. Otherwise, public policies for the greater good of society will not be understood nor accepted by the people for whom these very policies are designed for in the first place. There is no doubt that mass media plays an important role in shaping public opinion. This is even more important in the age of social media where fake news abounds. So the mainstream media has the responsibility of gathering information that is accurate and conveying views that are fair. The effort has to be made to understand the background thinking that went into any important policy. Our experience in Singapore is that the media can only be expected to come on board after senior government officials or elected political office holders share pertinent background knowledge with the media representatives. This is a process of building trust. For one, the media plays an important role in a democracy, media representatives are not the equivalent of elected representatives who have a responsibility to the constituents who elected them. In other words, the media should not perceive its role as one of being an institutional check-and-balance against the government. A professional media with high standards of competence should inform and communicate accurately and effectively. By all means, report or highlight public dissatisfaction or disquiet over certain government moves or decisions if it exists, but do so in the spirit of wanting to improve things by being able to provide better alternatives or suitable amendments. Now that implies a substantial knowledge of the matter at hand.

Dasho Kinley Dorji, Moderator:

Before we go into question-answer, I would like to give all the panelists an opportunity to comment on what they have heard so far from each other.

Tashi Dema:

With all due respect to all the former officials who worked in drafting the Constitution and the Civil Service Act, I feel that it could be a slightly borrowed idea from developed countries where their public servants are large in number. In our case, we have a very limited number of people and we not only know who is supporting whom but we also know who voted for whom. In this context, especially for the civil service, people who have the information are senior bureaucrats whose promotion depends on the recommendation of the government. When this is the case, how do they talk freely of plans, policies and activities of any government?

Dasho Karma Tshiteem:

I think civil servants' promotions are not in the hands of the political leaders. That is one of the reasons why the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC) is established as an independent autonomous body under the Constitution. It is to ensure that we do not create a system of spoils. Countries where they have such systems where elected governments can just change top leadership, those countries have not been doing well and we know the examples like Greece, etc. That is one of the mechanisms in place to make sure our civil service can remain apolitical for the reasons I mentioned earlier. This idea that in the name of 'apoliticalness', civil servants are refusing to talk to the media is more an excuse rather than a real reason because as you heard from what I mentioned, which is the explicit code of conduct, there is nothing which stops civil servants from talking. I think maybe there are also unrealistic expectations from the media's side. When civil servants speak, they can only give you facts but that is not what many reporters want. We just try to protect and promote the country's interest.

For senior civil servants, one of their responsibilities is also to speak to the media when necessary. But most of the time, when it comes to selling policies, it is actually the politicians who do it because that is at the heart of politics -- selling policies that get them elected if they are good. Once elected, those policies are implemented by civil servants to the benefit of the country. Just like the civil servants have to learn how to behave in this new environment, there's also a lesson for the media. I think that whatever comes from the media, even established media, is not necessarily true. If you look at the West, you can turn on CNN or Fox, and for the same issue, you will get two totally different perspectives. We do not know whether that is happening in Bhutan. But I do recall in certain conversations, people saying "Oh, this paper is more favourable to this political party". What

we should all be after are the best ideas that serve the country well and in doing so, there is space. In the government, there are all sorts of processes we have created to make sure our country can learn and keep on growing and we should all seek to do that.

The idea that as soon as there is a debate or a viewpoint expressed, especially if it is against the government's view, it is taken to be political. I think this is simply a lack of maturity. We have to reach a stage where we can talk about searching for better solutions because we should always seek the best solutions and we should not be attached to our positions. Can we try to move away from framing everything as political? I think that it is actually unfortunate and maybe that has led to a higher level of self-censorship than necessary. We do not want to upset people unnecessarily, but we need to create a safe space where this new culture can come. So I think it is just about learning to engage in this new space including with the media so that the purposes of good governance are promoted. I wanted to read this quote the Prime Minister of Singapore said in a speech to the civil servants, "In Singapore, we often think of policies as the real purpose of governance, while politics is merely the sometimes messy means of choosing a government. Ministers live in the land of politics, civil servants in the land of policies, and when you cross the border between the two, there is a rigorous checkpoint, you are frisked as you enter a different country. Government is not so clear-cut and simple because life is not so clear-cut and simple. Policy and politics cannot be separated so neatly." I wanted to highlight this to say that while we talk about an apolitical civil service, the fact is, they are actually engaged on a daily basis in terms of translating the visions or the directions the elected leaders have into policies that can further the interest of the country. So clearly, while we talk about being apolitical, civil servants by the nature of their job have to be involved in translating politics into policies for the benefit. The apolitical stance is only important to ensure that when they do this, they bring on board the full benefit of all their past experiences and their professional expertise and not be influenced or discoloured by their political preferences

Sangay Khandu:

I thought Dasho actually elaborated and gave it a really good context. This is perhaps one of the biggest challenges that I confronted many times as a serving Member of Parliament. Whenever you wanted to raise an issue you thought was pertinent, their immediate reference was that you either side with us or you are with them. There is no objectivity to any discussion. A rational logical argument is out of the window and you are given a political colour. I think this has put a lot of pressure on my colleagues and me, and I imagine this is also true for local government leaders. That worry makes you remain inactive. "*La bedawachin kha*

tangwu, di wa di ma beu da, ngenkha ma bani gi daen ley" (If you work, people will bad-mouth you, so it is better to not take the risk). So people fall back to being inactive and you will see slow response or no response as a result.

There is also a group of people who push the idea that policymaking is the lone spear of the executive and nobody else has any hand in it. I think a lot of us would agree that that is not true because, in the first place, our five-year plans are drafted by the civil service. It takes 2 and half years for them to work around and draft the policy, which forms the basis of the development activities of the next government for the next five years. So to say that policymaking is the sole spear of the elected government would be wrong from that perspective. Second, once the elected government comes into power, all the manifesto promises are not necessarily made a part of the plan. Not because political parties do not want to but there is already a plan drafted by the Planning Commission and then the political parties have been given a mandate but marrying those two have been a challenge. I think there has been a lot of progress but that is what the current Prime Minister also shared in the parliamentary debate once that the plans may be outdated and we are not able to act quickly enough in situations.

Similarly, I think you have political parties who are not necessarily elected in the parliament, but they are there nonetheless representing viewpoints of certain segments of society and that also needs to be included. If you do not have a platform for open discussions, it can quickly be labelled as being political in nature to tarnish the image of the ruling government and, therefore, immediately be discounted rather than being inclusive.

Lungten Dubgyur:

The constitutional fundamental right that every citizen above the age of 18 years has the right to vote itself is political. We have to also have the understanding that once there is a duly elected government, that being a civil servant, you should be apolitical. The design is that we can not shun our civil servants from not having a certain ideology and that we have to build it into the system.

Tan Lian Choo:

Tashi Dema, I completely sympathise with you because the media always wants to have information to write a story, to do a report and how do you get anything when you are not part of the process of any decision making. This is a major challenge not just for the media in Bhutan but all over the world in any media organisation. To come to the point that was raised by Sangay Khandu, a policy is not just the purview of those in government in the policymaking machinery. I think here, there is a slight gap between those who have worked within government where the

policy-making machinery is fully entrenched and those who are outside of the government. What is very often forgotten by those who are not in the administration is that policy is actually a process. It is not a product that comes from nowhere. A lot of it has to do with crunching numbers, looking at the rationale and why things are being done. So there is a major challenge within any administration to come up with a policy, not to mention that a newly elected government would want to do things to try and deliver on its campaign promises. And sometimes, it is not very easy for a single official -- because it is almost like a food chain -- to be able to talk to the journalist so readily unless he or she has been given the okay or green light from the higher-ups. But very often, it would be better for the political office holder to actually talk to the media directly and say, this is what we want to do for the policy and so forth.

And as for the issue of voting, I agree with Dasho Lungten that every official, every civil servant, every public servant in any country has a right as a citizen to exercise his vote and that is entirely a personal choice. So, if he or she is going to cast the vote without knowing what different political parties are saying, that is really not very healthy. In some ways, you do want an informed electorate and it is obviously very important to actually follow what is happening, being said or at least advocated by different interest groups, but at the same time, you have to remain professional as civil servants by being politically neutral at the time of execution of your duties. Thank you.



QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION



Karma, Audience Member:

My name is Karma Loday and I am one of the candidates of Bhutan Kuen-Nyam Party (BKP). In 2018, when we had the common forum, we had four political party representatives debating live on BBS and seven people in the audience. It struck us -- is this really a vibrant democracy? Like Ms Lian said, if you are to vouch for a political party, you have to be informed and to get information is that you be allowed to at least attend some of these common forums.

It has been an embarrassment for us, all the representatives -- sitting there with seven to eight audience members when there were seats for about 300 people. When it comes to 'apoliticalness', it boils down to the RCSC rule. The Constitution states that it is your right to vote, but it is also part of the Constitution, to be very specific 7.3 in the fundamental rights, that you have the right to information. Now, if you do not have the right to information, how do we say that it is a vibrant democracy and that you are voting based on the information that you have been given. So, these are the challenges the political parties i.e. we face. I think it is very fair to ask people to at least be given the opportunity to attend a meeting. That is all.

Ugyen, Audience Member:

My name is Ugyen and I am from Kuensel. I want to stay on the same point which Karma raised but I want to take it from the voter's point of view. If someone is a voter and a civil servant, why should we restrict them from attending campaign meetings and asking questions to the politicians? From our experience in the last three elections, we accuse civil servants of being very influential in deciding whom to vote for. Especially in villages, they can really influence their parents or even their communities. Keeping that in mind, they should be allowed to question the political parties.

Dasho Karma Tshiteem:

Why do they not attend common forum meetings? They are allowed to attend common forum meetings that ECB authorises because we believe in those same ideals -- they should be well informed. But they are not allowed to enter political party meetings. Why? Because we said civil servants must be apolitical and for being apolitical, it is important that they are not only apolitical but they must also seem to be apolitical. We feel that if civil servants start attending political party meetings, it will really impair the ability of that individual to then function independently and raise all sorts of questions in the eyes of maybe their workmates or maybe their political leadership of the day. So for these reasons, I think the design of the system is fine. I would not support the idea of civil servants attending political party meetings, my personal opinion, and as far as rules presently concerned also, they do not encourage that. But common forums, they

are allowed to attend and we tell civil servants also because they raise these questions with us. I think it may even be there in our annual report. But civil servants choose not to attend. So then, of course, there is nothing much we can do. Maybe it reflects other things. I do not know.

One question you raised was -- during the elections, for instance, political parties make pledges, I think the specific example was Wi-Fi -- why does the Ministry of Information and Communication not give its views? But you can see in the design of the system why that would not be a smart thing to do. While there is an election debate going on and political parties are pitching their pledges, if the civil service institutions like the Ministries begin trying to influence the voters by saying, "this is good, this is not good", I think that itself is meddling of a very high order which would not actually be desirable because that itself must go through processes and we have to ensure that those processes itself are again impartial.

So I think there is really no issue in the design of the system but it is more about how the individuals/actors play within those systems. That is why I was saying that culture does play a part. People do not change their behaviour or their mindset overnight. I guess like every country, we should give ourselves some time.

Sangay Khandu:

Attending political party meetings -- I think this is a challenge that we would have to, at some point in time, address. Because while we may say civil servants are not allowed or not expected to make political statements or show their likes and dislikes for political parties and candidates, but because of social media -- if you go through the timeline on Facebook -- I think we have come to a point where there is a lot of free flow of information. In fact, a lot of our civil servants are there interacting, sharing information on work progress and seeking input from citizens, which is the positive side of it. Perhaps what is a little more grey is the political statements being made out by civil servants on Facebook and Twitter. I think that is a developing area that we need to look at.

In terms of access to information, I think when Karma talked about informed choices, something the local government leaders have expressed to us when I was serving in the parliament is that during general elections when candidates or political parties, their presidents and vice presidents come to the constituencies for campaigns, our local government leaders are expected to hide away and not really interact with political party personalities. This, they say, puts them in a very awkward situation because they are elected and are office-bearers but when political party candidates do come, they are not able to actually receive them. I think the experience may not be the same everywhere but this is something some

of them actually shared, and this is similar to what the representative from BKP was saying that in terms of engagement and information, they are not able to access all that they can.

Dasho Kinley Dorji, Moderator:

I will ask Lian Choo one or two questions which I would like to ask you to respond to. One is, how do we involve youth in politics? I am asking this because we all know Singapore has been very successful in getting youth involved in all the national activities including politics, in this case. Then, in terms of not being allowed to attend meetings, is there anything that Singapore does to enable the voter? To understand the tension between political pledges and policies that are made. So how is that defined?

Tan Lian Choo:

I will start with the second question concerning attendance at political meetings and so forth. In Singapore, we make a distinction. Obviously, the civil servants and public servants are expected to be neutral, and obviously, as individuals, they have every right to be informed whichever way is possible. As Dasho Lungten says, it is a question of political maturity. Over time, people become confident enough to say things that they feel very strongly about and they are saying that as individuals in their own right. However, just like what Dasho Karma has said, it is not okay if the civil servant is actively campaigning within a political party and he or she goes to draft the platform for election. This is definitely not something that happens. So I think with maturity, you are right, individual civil servants will be able to make that call. At the local level, for example, in schools when you are organising activities to draw in the community and so on, it is not normal for teachers to not be involved, the teachers are part of the civil service as a teaching service. So this brings me to your first question -- how to engage youth in the activities of the day. I see there are many, many young Bhutanese on your forum today because I see a lot of college students. Singaporean youth, just like in Bhutan and everywhere else in the world, are very interested in environmental issues and climate change issues. Today, this is a major policy for all countries and it does not make sense to not include the public and not have officials involved in providing information as well as seeking inputs from the ground. The ground-up inputs are more and more important in policy areas like this.

Dasho Kinley Dorji:

This question has come up a number of times. I have also personally come across this recently from students that apparently some of the political meetings are held in school campuses and the students and even teachers seem a little perturbed that they are not allowed to attend. I guess they are not told to go on a hike but they are

not allowed anywhere near the meeting. So they are asking why. Since they are interested, why can they not listen to what is going on?

Sonam, Audience Member:

My name is Sonam and I work at the Election Commission of Bhutan. I would also like to talk about issues and challenges that ECB has had with media houses so far. Sometimes, I believe the media houses even raised the idea that ECB is untouchable but that is not the reality. We have our own perspective on why we should be silent and at the same time, why we should be strict with the task at hand. Sometimes, the challenges we face between the ECB and media is basically in the interaction. It depends upon how you approach an individual or office. Sometimes, trying to be so open with the media backfires.

Coming to the voter education part and the school students attending, as an institution looking after the promotion of democracy in Bhutan, we actually encourage our kids to engage in such a discourse and in politics and other democratic processes.

Dasho Karma Tshiteem:

I am giving my opinion. I think just because civil servants do not attend party meetings does not mean they are not well informed. From my personal experience, I know and I am sure that you all do also, that civil servants are probably the most well-informed. However, that does not mean they have to go and attend political party meetings. Information flows in many ways. As I said earlier, it takes some time. I think we have to be a little patient. We cannot change overnight. I would say that these are pangs of growing up and becoming a democracy and I think conversations like we are holding today, that BCMD facilitates, is helpful in shifting norms and the underlying behaviour. Thank you.

Dasho Kinley Dorji, Moderator:

“Politics does not interest you. Why? Is it because you have no interest in changing a world that suits you well.’ Does this statement resonate with you? Is this the outlook one should be having or sharing? Isn’t being apolitical a class privilege?” This is the question from Sherubtse.

Tan Lian Choo:

I share many of the sentiments that you have expressed earlier about how challenging it can be for a small population where everybody knows each other. But I think the challenge that we all face today, big or small, is the advent of social media and the possible damage it can cause with manipulation through false news and reports. I think we all have a responsibility, young and old, whether in the civil

service or in the political arena as politicians. If we really have an interest in how our country, our families and our communities are going to evolve from here on, we have to take an interest and we have to be engaged. Thank you.

Tashi Dema:

I live by the principle that I am first the citizen of the country, only then a journalist. I believe that all journalists have the national interest as a top priority. So please give us information for public interest and not for the individual voter. That does not mean that we are perfect or right all the time. We, the media, have our own shortcomings, but we can learn together. If I file a report, my editor or my team would go through it so we also have mechanisms in place. That is why, I feel that so far during the last three governments, we have done it professionally. We are always accused of writing against the government but I think that we are doing our work. However, please do not reprimand officials for talking to the media. Please let people talk to the media freely. That is it.

Dasho Karma Tshiteem:

On that last question about being apolitical, apolitical does not mean civil servants or other apolitical institutions are not interested in politics. They are interested. It is just that in the discharge of their functions, we do not want their political views to be an influence. It is this simple idea for us to keep in the back of our minds that being apolitical is not a bad thing. It is a good thing. It would be terrible if the whole civil service was politicised. We could not imagine what sort of conversation we might have had to have. In closing, I wanted to say that the conversation we are having today is really in the context of creating a vibrant democracy. I would say that throughout this very difficult time, -- the pandemic -- one shining light has been the leadership of His Majesty the King, as a result of which we are in a far better situation than what would actually be normal for a country of our size in our situation. Since we are a democratic constitutional monarchy, maybe going forward, I think we can continue to seek the blessing of His Majesty the King who is eventually the head of the Royal Government of Bhutan. I think the recent Royal Kasho presents a great opportunity to begin addressing some of these kinds of issues.

The second thing I was going to say is that maybe what we do need more of to address some of the issues we discussed is to have more independent think-tanks. This is something that is missing. If there were independent think-tanks that did very good independent research during electoral cycles where when the pledges are made, they give evidence to the people to make better choices, it would really help with the informed choices we are talking about.

Finally, I think we should continue to do more of what we are doing today - have more of these open dialogues, so that we begin to shift the norms. Culture does change slowly but if you have more of these kinds of open discussions, then those norms can shift much quicker. In that regard, I thank the organisers and everyone here.

Sangay Khandu:

One can stay away from registering oneself with a political party and call oneself apolitical but does that achieve the national purpose? To me, the focus should be more on achieving the purpose. Civil servants and office-bearers could be forced to be apolitical but if the processes become politicised, the outcome may not be achieved. That is why I always keep going back to the policy process. When political parties and candidates come out and make promises, I think one thing is certain, that you want informed choices. To assume that what political parties and candidates say is necessarily the truth may not be correct. Dasho Karma Tshiteem talked about evidence, and think-tanks, commentators and critics coming in to chip in their version of the truth to give the voters a broader understanding of what may be closest to the truth. I believe that is very crucial.

However, I think the process does not stop with that. We already have a planning commission that has drafted a five-year plan. All policies go through the policy protocol and if it is found to be not favourable to GNH, we drop the policy. But in reality, many policy decisions are also made which are never filtered or tested. So, I think that the process is what we need to focus on first. Second, when we test through the policy protocol, from what seniority are the people who actually do the testing? What kind of expertise do they bring to the table when they assess and weigh the policy? That is also an area that we need to discuss so that we know that we are in safe hands and so that not only the civil servant and 'man' is apolitical but the process itself is also apolitical.

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