

Bhutan Democracy Forum 2019

Democracy: A Path to Good Governance

Date: 30 April

Convention Hall

Royal University of Bhutan, Thimphu



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Bhutan Democracy Forum 2019

Panel I



The Bhutan Democracy Forum 2019

A Transcript

Introduction

Moderator, Dasho Kinley Dorji: I will start by thanking the Royal University, BCMD and Bhutan Democracy Forum for inviting me to be a part of this conversation on democracy. This session is being recorded by BBS to be broadcasted on BBS.

So just to place a kind of perspective on this conversation, we are talking about democracy, it's an on-going discussion, discourse after the first decade we are going to take stock, look where we are and issues if there are, obviously there are issues and then the way forward. We selected a theme, which is 'Democracy: a Path to Good Governance' for special purpose being that we must understand the context we are discussing, and the perspective. When we were discussing in the beginning 2007 and 2008, we noticed that in many countries democracy wasn't working well. They saw it as an election and in other cases they saw it as a goal.

But we have the advantage of GNH vision, Bhutan's vision. And we place 'democracy as a path to good governance' in that vision that good governance has always been there as a national vision. The systems evolved, we had monarchs reigning from palaces and courts. Then we had the former government, ministries, department, and agencies established. And since 2008 we have had elected executive power, elected government in power. So that the vision does not change, the path has been changing. So that has been the basic perspective. Both democracy and good governance is such a broad topic that we expect the kind of discussion to be very wide ranging.

Honourable speakers are all veteran politician already, meaning having taken part in elections and taken part in debates. So while they are from four different parties we request to please be yourselves and not necessarily share the party line but a conversation for all Bhutanese citizens, and we know that this is a conversation that is growing, gaining more depth.

So the speakers, I am going to call them in alphabetical order. So we will start. We will give 10 minutes. First speakers will share their thoughts on democracy, where we are? Where we are going? Where we should be going? Where we are not going perhaps? And then we will open the floor for discussions. Questions and answers will all be recorded. So thank you very much. For speakers we have Sonam Tobgay from BKP, MP Dil Maya Rai from DNT, Lily Wangchhuk from DPT and Kinzang Wangdi from PDP. So may I ask Sonam Tobgay or Tobler to start the conversation?



Bhutan Kuen-Nyam Party Vice President Sonam

Tobgay: Good morning. How many of you in this room really truly trust politicians? Very few. For that matter how many of you trust political establishments? Political parties? BKP, DNT, PDP, and DPT? For that matter how many of you here trust national institutions of importance say constitutional bodies like ACC? You have my president and former *lyonpo* (minister) having worked in ACC, OAG, RCSC and in so many constitutional bodies.

How many of us trust these bodies of national importance because if the trust is lacking, then we lack the essence of any collective negotiations for any sustainable solutions. Say, for example, hydropower development, tourism policy, unemployment. If there

is mistrust, then fear creeps in, then creeps in the mask of not being yourself. So, therefore, it is very important for an elected government comprising of politicians both inside the parliament and outside the parliament to restore public faith and confidence, political trust in a politician and, in our institutions.

Do we lack trust in our society? Has trust come to a breaking point? Or as some say are we experiencing trust deficit because if we do, we really need to do a lot of thinking, contemplation, and reflection on ourselves. Because as a politician we have to understand clearly the kind of actions we take, the kind of decision we make, the kind of laws we implement to restore trust and faith listening to people's views, public feedback promising no less than what you can deliver.

And I am sure and I only cite these examples as a citizen not as a BKP Vice President. We have had headlines on 3-5 million Ngultrums being siphoned on hospitality and entertainment expenses. And can institutions that are supposedly the custodians of public fund for limited public resources excuse themselves for lack of a guideline, for lack of rules? A thousand Ngultrum is a lot of money to a farmer of Dorokha and Samtse or for a farmer in Zhemgang, or a farmer in other *dzongkhags* (districts). And I cite example as a citizen rather than as someone wearing a party hat.

And then we have also had headlines on eight babies being, of having died at the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. Do we have accountability? I am sure everybody is trying hard. They all mean well but these instances break the trust. Shouldn't there be trust between the people and the elected government? So my talk this morning is mainly focusing on trust and accountability as main pillars of good governance.

Let's look at 10 years of democracy. What have we achieved in terms of measures like voter turnout, women representation in the Parliament, Local Government participation? Maybe we have had some success rates but in the course of time, do we still maintain camps? Are there still subtle camps existing, I am DPT or you are PDP, I am BKP or you are DNT. Can't we afford to cast these political differences aside and coexist as the Bhutanese first in a small society like ours, highly vulnerable in terms of geopolitics?

When these creep in every other election then we become vulnerable, we become weak as a society. No matter what if the crack doesn't heal, they'll remain to be weak. So therefore 10 years of democracy, we need to reflect upon ourselves on what have we achieved. Do we continue to see polarisation on the rise? Is everybody happy speaking politically correct? Is popularism the name of the game? Or should someone come up and say let's do something, which is right, or let's do what is correct? And I really applaud some of the statements made by DNT Government saying, "If we lose the next election, it will be because of our taxes". And I encourage our Prime Minister and his team to make difficult decisions for that will help the country in the long-run.

Let's look at the macro level in terms of 10 years of democracy. Have the past governments steered the economy to create further employment? The issues of Earn and Learn Programme, I am not here to judge who is right or wrong but there are some of our young brothers and sisters out there having a difficult time. Has our trade balance improved or do we still experience a 30-billion trade deficit as was reported a week ago by Kuensel.

So, I think these are the things we need to question ourselves in the course of democracy. Now, I think this is a perfect space to be no more sensitive. Let's enjoy the discourse. We talk so much about happiness, domains, variables, pillars, so on and so forth. I live in Debsi. My office is in Motithang and I am sure some of you live in Taba and Dechencholing. We don't have a drinking water. There is a lack of 24 hours running drinking water.

I think it is the duty and the responsibility and accountability of every government to provide basic conditions as simple as drinking water. Otherwise how can we pursue happiness? For all of us it will be drinking water. For some people it will be a luxury home or for some people it will be a luxury car. For others it will be a roof over the head.

Our bounds differ in terms of happiness but governments in power should provide the basic conducive environment for all of us to pursue that happiness. And I was watching resource person from Singapore speak on "nation branding". We have first branded ourselves as the country of happiness and I heard the moderator at the session, Dasho Kinley speak on TV: "Are we living the ideas of happiness in our conduct, in our behaviour, in our habits, in our construction patterns."

Of course, we have seen that plastic ban. But it has to go beyond the ban in terms of pursuing happiness. Do we import more than what we require? Do we consume more than what we require? One of the pillars of happiness, equitable sustainable development for instance: Are we practicing what we preach? Are we walking the talk? So, I think these are the questions we need to ask to assert what democracy has given us aside from electing a government every five years.

What if we leave everything as sensitive? Then we don't get along discussing anything. For example, immigration, I see a lot of problems but no body dares to discuss immigration.

I think have to bring things to the fore because I think RUB and BCMD – I'd really like to congratulate the two institutions for giving us this space to express ourselves. You know, even foreign policy, I mean the foreign minister is here. We cannot say it is sensitive, we cannot say it is cast in stones. We have to discuss as intellectuals, as academia, as in public discourse. When we have ideas, I

think politics is where the best arguments win. We have to have good solutions that have to emerge in back and forth dialogue as compared to putting everything under the rug and taking it as sensitive, and no one taking the responsibility.

Let's talk about 'apoliticalness' before my time runs out. Everybody blankets themselves under being 'apolitical' and yet I was telling my colleagues that the 'apolitical' ones are the ones who are most political. So can we evolve as institutions? Thank you.



Dil Maya Rai, Member of Parliament, National Assembly: Our colleague, very esteemed vice president of BKP really touched on the components of trust and I was really amazed that he brought this out and it's really true, without trust nothing exists in this world. Least developing, countries like us, for example, would never be where we are today if the developed countries did not trust us and give us aid. So along that line I guess trust with each other, trust within parties, trust with institution is really essential.

I would like to reiterate what he mentioned although we come with the best of intentions as political parties. Each manifesto I am sure is, you know, drawn to serve our people, the country in the best of intentions but as one of the parties take up the government cap, we see the trust deteriorating, from the very voters, who

voted. That is a sad reality I would say and I would like to urge every citizen, every voter and electorate to build on that.

Like I mentioned about technology and change, we cannot stay idle, we cannot be stuck anywhere in terms in time. We cannot help but change. I mean change is constant but of course change has to be for the positive and for the welfare of the people and the institutions. That way I think democracy is one of the key components or democracy is the driving force to good governance. I am not saying this just because I am one of the politicians or one of the Members of Parliament but that was how I was educated when I was reading and studying about democracy and politics and political parties in my college days.

And we have that famous writer Amartya Sen who wrote about 'development as freedom'. We love the word freedom. Freedom connotes happiness but one is that we do not have trust on democracy, that there is deteriorating trust in democracy and freedom comes only as a part of democracy. I am sure all of us have experienced (democracy) in the last one decade. We are into the 11th year now. So, the system set up as of now in our country, the bureaucracy for example is nearly six decades old, started in early 60s whereas democracy is just one decade old. Maybe the bureaucracy is already so well established and functioning and the system is so well in place that no body raises eyebrows on it. But democracy, one decade old, is still struggling to put so many things in place.

As a Member in the Parliament, I would say there are still so many things to put in place. *Gara bey me tsha sey zhuni inn la* (Not everything could be achieved). There are still some things to be put in place, we are still building up, we are still evolving, so it's just a matter of time. And I bet in the next 60 or 50 years maybe democracy will be as respected as the bureaucracy is at the moment. But only if we learn to trust a little, make space for each other then we are really heading to good governance.

On the role of political parties outside the parliament, what could political parties do outside the parliament? So, now I am in the parliament, I also have party affiliation. Sometimes we meet and sometimes our General Secretary, you know, post some, tweets to meet and sends some agenda that we will be discussing, and I appreciate his efforts. I bet it is the same with other parties.

I have heard other parties too attending meetings. And we also get advice. We get feedbacks from them as the third party observer. So that's what parties outside the parliament can do. Be objective observers give constructive feedbacks to the parties in power or in position in that matter they can do better, and not just show the weaknesses and pinpoint and try to bring down others.

And of course, parties can maintain constant touch with the constituents which the elected members can improve because they are already into so many nitty-gritties of the day, trying to fulfil the Terms of Reference, requirements, the everyday works. So, we tend to get a little lesser time to keep in touch with the constituents. So political parties outside the parliament can take up and be more active because to make a democracy a vibrant one we will have to keep in touch with the constituents.

Ways to enable parties to develop stronger mandates I guess we need to have educated, informed and somebody who will be really objective. We need to have such missionaries in the parties. If our party missionaries are not educated, then they cannot give you objective feedback. Then I think it will just crumble. So, the missionaries, the people functioning inside the party should be educated about democracy, should be educated about politics also and how it functions. And they should be given more exposure to the functionaries of the parliament especially during the assembly session, if they can attend and learn or try to mix more with the elected members. And of course, we have the Election Commission of Bhutan to help give them skills in capacity building.

On the apolitical note, I too think along the same way as the previous speaker/colleague. I think there is nothing called 'apolitical' in our country or anywhere else for that matter because politics affects everybody, each one of us. The decisions made by the Parliament and the government affects everybody. So, when it affects everybody, when the work we do is coming from an elected government there is no one 'apolitical'. And with this cap of apolitical when citizens, when bureaucracy tries to stay away from especially during the election campaigns and once when one of the political parties becomes the government, what I have observed is, suddenly in front of us comes the whole Five-Year Plan which we have no access to before. And then there is just no time to redo it or to review it well. So there is like lack of information or access to information. But this party already elected to government has to rule, has to go by it somehow, it's like learning by doing. I guess if we are to have good governance to deliver, I think we should not be apolitical but should work together on this. Thank you.



Druk Phuensum Tshogpa Vice President Lily Wangchhuk: Kuzu Zangpo, La and Good Morning. Allow me to express my deepest gratitude to all the distinguished guests present here: The honourable Foreign Minister, Honourable speaker, former Cabinet minister, former speaker, former chairperson of National Council, Members of the Parliament, representatives of political parties, CSOs, various organisations, students, ladies, and gentlemen for sparing your precious time to be here.

Your presence here is a manifestation of the importance that all of us attach to our democracy and I am immensely privileged to be able to share my thoughts on 'Democracy: the Path to Good Governance' with such distinguished gathering. I would also like to thank BCMD and RUB for

initiating this very important forum. Such dialogue and forum will go a long way in shaping Bhutan into a model democracy in the world.

Both democracy and good governance are not new ideas for a country. It's nothing new. A democratic system of governance in fact existed even before the formal introduction of democracy in 2008. In fact, democratisation in 2008 was merely a combination series of political reforms initiated by our visionary and enlightened monarchs. His Majesty The Third Druk Gyalpo established the National Assembly in 1953 and several other democratic institutions. This was continued with further decentralisation initiatives through the 80s and 90s by the father of democratic Bhutan, His Majesty Druk Gyal Zhipa.

Most of the structures and systems were already put in place, and the political transition that we made was an eventual fruition of process of sustained political reforms. Furthermore good governance as one of the four pillars of our Gross National Happiness (GNH) has always been the cornerstone of a development policy. Democracy and good governance are mutually reinforcing. Good governance is one of the preconditions of democracy and GNH. Our top-most priority is to achieve GNH and democracy is a means to that end. In this context the role of good governance is even more fundamental. As it in turn seeks democratic principles, good governance promotes the rule of law, accountability, transparency and participation in decision decision-making processes. And these values and principles can be effectively put to practice and executed only in a democratic environment. That is why bad governance is the central characteristics of undemocratic region.

In Bhutan democratic participation quite often ends with an election process while in fact election is merely one of the spokes in the wheel of democracy. To institute a strong culture of good governance we need a much greater level of participation of the people beyond elections, in public policy and national decision-making. For in the end, this is what government means.

While Bhutan has witnessed much remarkable progress both in terms of democratic processes and good governance over the last few decades, the political transition since 2008 has exposed our nation to some unhealthy trends. These challenges are largely related to flaws of democracy including political cynicism for politicians and politics, voter apathy, political alienation, the political immaturity, decreasing involvement of people in social and political participation, lack of effective political participation of women in politics and declining confidence in elected leaders and government.

Further, we are confronted with a number of issues such as limited press freedom, victimisation of party supporters, and tendency for people to vote on their own interests rather than what is better for the country as a whole. Inability of the educated population to exercise their choice based on informed choice given the lack of interaction with aspiring politicians is another issue. Short term goals and empty promises, wasteful government time and resources, erroneous decisions by elected leaders, immoral practices, bribery and corruption political corruptions during elections, unfair trade practices, misuse of media and social media, bias media reporting polarisation, fragmentations of the society along the party line and huge expenses on elections.

One way of addressing these challenges is by educating our population on the essence of democracy, thereby, raising the political consciousness. This can also largely help reduce the political cynicism, voter apathy and enhance political participation. Gender sensitisation programmes will largely encourage high female participation. More flexible interpretation of electoral laws could address the challenges related to political alienation of aspiring politicians, while strict monitoring and implementation of election rules can help reduce immoral practices, bribery and political corruption, polarisation as well as fragmentation of the society.

Promotion of greater transparency, responsibility, and accountability could prevent wasteful government time and resources and erroneous decisions by elected leaders, unfair trade practices, and victimisation of party supporters as well. More flexibility in the civil service rules and electoral laws could also encourage competence in aspiring politicians, thereby, creating a pool of effective leaders with enhanced confidence of the people with longer-term objective.

Greater press freedom could help promote greater transparency, accurate reporting and doing away with primary elections and most strict rules dealing with resignation of elected leader could help prevent huge expenses and wastage of funds on elections. It is also important for us to scrutinise the party pledges; unrealistic short sighted expensive populous pledges should not be allowed since such pledges will not only cost a country dearly in the long-term but such pledges will also land us in a perennial state of dependency on our neighbours and donors.

Besides electoral participation people at every level of public life must become involved in the decision-making that affect their lives. Policies are more likely to be stable and sustainable when they enjoy popular understanding and support. This requires some means of public consultation to help input into government decision and some means of protecting policies and actions that do harm to national interests. The elected leader should be responsive to the needs and concerns of society and be held accountable to the people.

In an ideal democratic environment the elected government should be open to criticism. There is a need of press freedom and government policies and actions if they are exposed without fear and favour. Then we can truly say there is a meaningful participation, responsive transparent accountable government. While government fully responds to the interests of every group given the large differences of yet different groups must be heard. People must have access to the parliamentary committees and there must be regular and frequent interaction between the elected representatives and the society. There should be some degree of political equality amongst citizens.

It is a known fact that political equality can be the link to the economic equality and those with money and high social status has vastly more access to power and influence of a government than the poor and the middle class. The elected leader must also possess good understanding of people's challenges, issues and ground realities backed by a professional civil service. To boost the morale of the civil servants which play an important role in productivity and functioning of the organisations will require an effective performance management system led by dedicated leaders. It is also imperative for us to avoid meddling with the intangible and important part of the organisation.

Transparency requires freedom of information (including an act) and ensures that citizen can acquire information about how the government makes decisions, conducts business and spends public money that can also promote good governance. Effective oversight requires open flow of information and effective check and balance by which different institutions check and hold one another accountable.

Democracy and good governance can also build social capital in the form of networks and associations that draw people together in relations of trust, reciprocity, voluntarism and cooperation for common objectives. The deeper the country's reserve of social capital, the more these will be based on horizontal relations of equality and the more vigorous coordination and commitment for public good. Governance can only be good when it is restrained by law, when the constitutional laws are widely known, when the law is applied equally to the mighty and the meek.

To conclude, the promotion of good governance goes beyond the government sector and includes all relevant sectors from the private sector and society with effective communications and greater partnership between them. Democracy and good governance are, therefore, two of a kind in the sense that they help to strengthen each other in any given political system. Democracy can effectively lay the foundation of good governance, which is key to sustainable development in the country and we must make every effort to ensure that our democracy is a path to good governance. Thank you for your attention.



PDP Bartsham-Shongphu Constituency Candidate Kinzang Wangdi: I must also thank BCMD for providing this forum to interact with the gathering here and with the panelists from other parties. I have been quite faithful to the theme that was provided: “Democracy: a Path to Good Governance”. What I will try to impress by my delivery is to say that it is not the institutions, the systems that is important in delivering good governance but the person behind it and the intention that delivers good governance. And I will basically be making references to our own developmental democracy over the last 10 years or 60, 70 years. Democracy has been quite a popular system of governance since ancient times and dating back as far as 5th Century BC. But world history and recent developments now tell us that democracy probably is not the best form of government.

It is the political parties and the leaders as the gatekeepers of democracy who make a difference in providing good governance. Recently now we know that the biggest and the oldest democracy, the United States of America, has been downgraded in the democracy index from full democracy to a flawed democracy. And recently if you look in the news, democracy is not doing too well. Having said that I think Bhutan, prior to 2008, was an absolute monarchy but we had our visionary kings. And the kings who had been empowered with all the powers by the people of Bhutan since 1907 yet choose deliberately to embark on the principles of democracy and good governance was one of their prime aims.

To put my case in point His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, the Third Druk Gyalpo established the National Assembly in 1953 to provide a forum and voice for the people and also to inculcate political consciousness among the people so that they can participate in what’s happening in governance. To induct liberal principles in the system a clause was also promulgated in the procedures of the National Assembly then whereby a vote of no confidence to the king himself and also he had withdrawn veto power in the assembly which he voluntarily surrendered.

This was followed closely by the father of democracy, His Majesty The King Jigme Singye Wangchuck by refining good governance all the while nurturing a vision towards democracy. He instituted the DYT (*Dzongkhag Yargye Tshogdu*) in 1981 and GYT (*Gewog Yargye Tshogchung*) in 1991 to empower the local government through decentralisation to allow decision-making process right down to the grassroots level. This has led to rich dividends for Local Government leaders now where they identify what they need for the community and they can plan better.

Then in 1998 the National Assembly was empowered to elect cabinet ministers thus devolving the power of the king. And finally our drafting committee was set up to draft a written Constitution of Bhutan in 2001 while instituting requisite constitutional offices to provide the required democratic checks and balances. The nurturing of democracy by our successive kings finally culminated in the successful conduct of the first parliamentary elections in 2008 and the enormous task of ensuring successful growth of the nascent democracy fell upon His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck.

10 years and three parliamentary elections later we have reasons to be proud for the success in democracy and thank His Majesty The King for his selfless service to the nation and being the driving force in strengthening democracy that we cherish today. In the golden words of His Majesty The King, the security, tranquillity and happiness of the Bhutanese people has been achieved through hard work and sacrifices of our forefathers and the selfless leadership of successive kings since Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck, the First King of Bhutan who has shown that there are no other duties for a king than to serve the people.

Democracy as I see it now has been strongly rooted. People have faith and trust in democracy. The voter turnout in the recent third parliamentary election was 71.4 percent. The economic intelligence of unit has upgraded the democracy index ranking from 94, five notches up from 99 which was procured last year by the foreign Minister. However like all good things democracy has come at a cost. I do not want to sound too bleak but if we have to do all part in fulfilling the visions and aspirations of His Majesty The King in strengthening democracy we need to know and share what plagues our democracy. It is not too late and something that is doable if we as citizens, if we as political parties put our hearts together.

So, what are the challenges? Traditionally we Bhutanese are a very close society. We love our families, we respect our elders, we respect our parents, and we respect our fellow citizens. But in the name of democracy, this may have been diminishing and we may have been fracturing the social fabric, which is one of the pillars of GNH. The consequences of which in the long-run could be devastating to the unity and the stability of the nation. As two of the previous speakers mentioned, the society is now divided along party line, along the ethnicity, along social standings, but most visibly along the party line. We are a small country where we cannot afford to break apart. I think we have always been together and as a landlocked country I think the unity and not withstanding diversity, nourishing the unity and the stability of the nation is seen to be very important.

With democracy there has also been very unrestrictive media voices especially in the social media under false names. A lot of character assassination, defamation is going around. I think this is not Bhutanese. Some of the writings on the social media I find very pertinent, very true and very productive but yet people feel the need to hide behind false names and speak this. I think as a Bhutanese, if you love your country it is desirable that we come in front as Dasho Neten said last year, 'remove your mask and then have your say'. There are a lot of hate speeches. There is misuse of mass interest to score a political point. There is a demand of the electorate, which is not scientifically proven or economically viable. Yet politicians tend to make these pledges.

Most of all I think today if you look at citizens, the loyalty is aligned to your party and, as Sonam Tobgay mentioned, do people still maintain camps? I think yes. This would be detrimental to our nation, to our security, and to our sovereignty. What we need to do, my request for the other political parties is that we put our heads together and that we do not have our alignment and loyalty to any party. I think once the elections are over, let us have our loyalty aligned to "One Nation One People" under the wise and visionary benevolent king. Thank you very much.

Question and Answer Session



Questions from the Audience

Question: Many people didn't raise their hands when one of the speakers asked if they trusted the political parties, does it indicate that people do not trust the parties? I have heard through some sources that some political parties are being funded by wealthy individuals, so would be nice if you could clarify whether funding from such sources are allowed?

Sonam Tobgay: When I asked the question to the audience, all looked to their left and right and very few raised their hands. However, I didn't ask the question because I expected everyone to raise their hand. As a democratic nation, our national priority should be or if we have to achieve the goals of GNH, there should be trust between the government and its people. If there is no trust between them, we cannot achieve anything. It's not just between the government and its people, among public there should be trust, among the political parties, and to work together towards a common goal is very important.

To answer your last question, democracy comes along with elections. During the elections, there are so many manifestos and campaigns conducted and during such campaigns I am sure none of the speakers will disagree about the huge expenditures involved. And as I have stated earlier constitutional bodies like Election Commission of Bhutan, Anti-Corruption Commission, RBP, etc, all work according to the laws to conduct a fair and a transparent election. For example, if there is a conduct of corruption in the form of bribery, there is no way such an act could go unnoticed in a fair democratic country because our nation is small with less population, and our public is innocent and illiterate. I see with the help of education the future of our democracy will only give a way to good governance.

Lily Wangchhuk: Just to add on the relation to trust. I believe there are two things to that. One is maybe because of one or two bad examples there is a generalisation that all our aspiring politicians are the same. There is a tendency to generalise. Two, is I think worldwide there is always this negative perception of politics and politicians. So as a result all of us whether be aspiring politicians or your elected leaders I think there is this very wrong and negative perception that we are all there to serve our own interest. And I think this is a really wrong and misconstrued, a negative perception because the fact is, we never wanted democracy, the democracy has been gifted to us and most of us in politics, I think, we are all there responding to the call of the nation. It is time for us to give back to the society. We are what we are because of the nation and its time to give back and I think we are all there for a bigger cause in ourselves but unfortunately there is this huge conflict of mistrust in aspiring politicians. And I think you need to trust us, the aspiring politicians, the political parties, the elected leaders better and engage more with us to be able to serve you better.

Question 2: Each political party have their own principles, vision and mission, and also ideologies. Do the political parties practice these ideologies only during the campaign or do they even practice this after elections even if not elected and beyond? Because after elections we feel that the non-elected parties do not play any active role after that.

Kinzang Wangdi: To be frank, my own party, PDP we have practiced equity very well during the last five years of governing. And everyone has observed that, we have improved the status of Local Government. But now because we are not elected, we can only give suggestions or as advise to the

current government. Otherwise our ideologies do not have any space. It never happens that a political party boycotts their ideologies if they don't get elected. If we just discontinue with a party because we lost an election and come up with a new party after five years because election is near, then that's the end of democracy. That's why the ideologies and vision should be followed or rather I would say we follow whether we are ruling or opposition and as long as the political party exists.

Lily Wangchhuk: You stated as ideologies and from my opinion ideologies and mission are two different things. Ideologies if I explain, for example, any challenges faced by a political party and the means and ways to tackle that challenge would be an ideology. And in Bhutan, different political parties have many different ideologies. So I cannot say definitely that this party's ideology is this or that.

If we talk about the mission of a party, then every political party has their own. For example, Phuensum Tshogpa has their mission as equality. Nyamrup's mission is also almost similar. You all know that DPT's mission is not just only about equality but also concerns national interests, listening to people's needs and concern. We have been practicing this since the party's existence, we still do and we hope to do better in the future. We conduct party meetings, we also make a point to raise people's issues in the Parliament and we will continue to serve in the same way.

Dil Maya Rai: Your question about if we political parties implement their respective ideologies only during the campaign or do we also stick to them even after getting elected. I really think that we have to live by our ideology and then you know objective aim and vision. So Nyamrup Tshogpa we had our ideology or whatever you call as "Narrowing the Gap" and even after being elected as the government all our efforts are geared towards it. In fact even while implementing the 12th Five-Year Plan objectives we try to align with our vision, with our "Narrowing the Gap" ideology.

We have already started with the class 10 cut off point. We have lifted it up to class 12. Children can study on state expenses. So that is one effort we have already implemented. So many things down the line, for example, maternal allowance. Also we are trying our best to give employment to those households who just do not have anyone employed. All our efforts will be geared towards narrowing the gap and even other parties for that matter who are not elected they should I think uphold their ideologies and their objectives and work towards it.

Sonam Tobgay: For *Kuen-Nyam* the broad ideal is the means are equally important while achieving a successful end. So we will not win by hook or by crook. We may appear like fools in the game of politics but in the long-run in terms of sustainability, in terms of the robustness, the vibrancy of democracy we have to inculcate as GNH citizens, means should equally justify a successful end.

If you want to attain enlightenment, you must work for it. And for that following the right path is important. Just like that any political parties or any ruling government, to work with a mission is very essential. In 2008, DPT governed with the mission equality and justice and everyone is aware how successful and what challenges they faced. Likewise in 2013, PDP governed with equity as their mission and that too everyone knows how many challenges, and how much success, trust, and faith people had.

We *Kuen-Nyam* also have our own mission. Along with the mission, it is important the people are aware of culture, tradition, rules and laws, responsibilities and duties, plans, and policies. Until now, *Kuen-Nyam* never had the opportunity to govern but if we do get the chance to govern, our mission, while keeping the means as important in achieving a successful end, one of our core business is to minimise corruption. In the present day, we as a whole, I think has not been able to confront corruption. We couldn't prove that during the election results. And as I theorise I feel like people have a problem with corruption. In future, let's not have regrets. We have live examples, in Africa, neighbouring countries. We have big elections in India right now, BJP and Congress. We all need to reflect properly. Thank you.

Question 3: During the recent elections, we were not informed and could not stay updated about the elections because the news were delivered verbally and there was no one to interpret it for deaf people like me. I could not understand the manifestoes of the four political parties. People with normal vision and hearing could understand what was being broadcasted on BBS but for people living with deafness and hearing impairment like us, we couldn't understand. So my question is, in the future, what measures are you going to take so that people like us are not left behind?

Dil Maya Rai: We all know that our country is a UN member and we have adopted SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) since the last government. Since 2015 we have been implementing, aligning SDGs with our national key result areas of our Five-Year Plans. So being a member and party to SDGs, our NKR is closely aligned with the SDGs with the theme, 'leaving no one behind'. We will definitely make our policy inclusive and definitely will look into this and we may not have started working on it with concerted effort straight away but we will not leave this behind. And 12th Five-Year Plan is supposed to be implementing 16 SDGs that have been aligned with our NKRs so definitely no one will be left behind.

Sonam Tobgay: I am proud that an interpreter for the people living with deafness and hearing impairment is being provided here and I also appreciate you all for taking interests and participating in such political forums and democracy. You have our support. Even our government through the developmental support from the United Nations has been putting in place the culture and policy to support the differently-abled. And I also have faith in our present government that they will also provide necessary support without a doubt. And I wish you best in all your endeavors.

Lily Wangchhuk: It is said that some three percent of our population are disabled which is actually a huge percentage for a country that is on the path with GNH as a development goal. It is also a known fact that we are actually not a very disabled friendly country in terms of our policies, access, needs and responses. And I think one of the reasons for that is maybe there is a lack of space and platform. Whether its political parties or leaders we have not probably had an opportunity to have this platform where we could have this exchange of concerns and challenges faced by a disabled population.

As far as DPT is concerned, in our manifesto we had put in a lot of policies and programmes for addressing the needs and challenges of our disabled population that I think is key. It is also heartening to know that DNT also has plans of addressing your challenges and needs. And we are hopeful that we can work closely together with the government to address the needs, concerns and challenges of our disabled population. I would also encourage people like yourself to be an effective voice for the

disabled population and to interact with the leaders, interact with the government and make your voices and concerns known. I am sure if it were known, the government would be responsive to your needs and challenges.

Kinzang Wangdi: Three percent of the total population is very huge in our context and it is very important that we provide our support towards them. When PDP was the ruling government, we brought up a discussion with one of the NGOs, before the end of its term, about coming up with plans and policies for the differently-abled people and we have even included these policies in our pledges and manifestos. Not just differently-abled people but also how to support the youths dealing with substance abuse and people with all special needs. And to know that the present government having included such policies and supports towards them is a great initiative and we all should support it.

Question 4: Is our country moving towards good governance and are we following democracy properly or not?

Dil Maya Rai: I think we are. We already are because we have already done the elections and our voters, with each time they are becoming more and more educated and aware about the whole process. Even the turnout is improving with elections so that shows that we are on the right track in following the democratic principles in that matter. Good governance, yes it requires all of our efforts not just the elected members but also the citizens' because it has to be a two-way effort. And to hold the elected members accountable, and the government accountable is the citizens' responsibility. So that way we can really move towards good governance but with each individual's effort we will be there and I guess we are already heading towards it.

Sonam Tobgay: I think we are on the right track in terms of good governance but the larger question is, is it enough? Should we continue to be complacent? Can we do better? Can we excuse ourselves from saying we have done well in the past comparing with neighbours in the regions or comparing with the LDC fellow countries? Small as we are, 700,000 and landlocked, I see big opportunities if we get ourselves together, if we restore public trust and public confidence in our institutions, in our politicians.

Lily Wangchhuk: I would say yes we are on track but at the same time given some flaws associated with democracy I think we are also making some mistakes. And we are conveniently overlooking some of the mistakes because I think there is this assumption that countries have taken 100 years to have a matured democracy.

We are only a young democracy and we also have to go through the process and make some mistakes, learn, and rectify but I believe as a small country we cannot afford to make mistakes. A small country, a small population and yes the advanced democracies may have taken 100 years to realise their mistakes. Maybe everything is addressed now but then we have the luxury of not making any mistakes. We have the luxury of learning from the good practices of more successful democracies. We have ample opportunity of not replicating of what has not worked and thereby it is very important that we have dialogues such as this where we openly discuss challenges in every frank manner. The flaws related to democracy and find solutions in addressing a way forward. So we can work towards His Majesty's vision for this country and making this a model democracy for the world.

One of the challenges we have been going through in the last few elections is the polarisation and fragmentation of our society along the party lines. And the fact is parties do take advantage of the situation and if we don't address this now and if our society is further divided. 10-20 years down the line it's going to be really difficult to rectify. Our monarchs have taken 100 years to achieve the strong sense of unity and solidarity we share today. And with 10 years of democracy we have literally divided our society and if you don't do something about this now, I think 10 years down the line it's going to be even more difficult for us, our own security and sovereignty maybe at stake. So I believe that it's really time that we take stock of things. We are on track but not everything is perfect. There is a lot more that we can do to promote and shape Bhutan into a model democracy.

Kinzang Wangdi: I think we have the good fortune of having His Majesty The King and the people constantly reminding the politicians if they go wrong. So because of that as of now I think democracy is fairly on track, is going good. But having said that I think we are not free from risks of going astray, going wrong because the world over if we look at democracies they start off well but once they get that power, you know, it goes to the head and there is a possibility of going wrong. So that's where you and I as citizens we have to make sure that this doesn't happen. And democracy as perceived to be unique for the Bhutanese context has to go on. We have to be custodians for that.

Dil Maya Rai: Just a humble reaction to Aum Lily's comment on the party line division and the society being fragmented. I think because this is democracy, because there are parties to choose our electors have no option but to choose one of them. And in choosing one of them, I don't think that's party line affiliation or society fragmentation. But after the whole process is over I do not see much fragmentation. Calls come, supports are asked by people from all the parties for help. I mean I don't think they are only our supporters, I am sure they are from across all the parties. And even as we go as MPs to our respective constituencies, we don't talk as DNT candidate anymore. We talk as the Member of Parliament for the whole country and the whole society. So I do not see the fragmentation as perceived.

Conclusion

Sonam Tobgay: Now as a summary of this morning's sessions, I would like to give due respect to Member of Parliament's pertinent questions, the three questions he raised. I would not make it explicit. But I think to satisfy your concerns and my concern and most of our concerns here in terms of addressing interest groups, in terms of geopolitics, in terms of partners in parliament and there could be many more in the future, horsetrading, as someone was saying, so on and so forth. Therefore not that it would work perfectly, my suggestion this morning is all of us should take politics sincerely and seriously.

We cannot embrace politics as a last resort or I'm going to superannuate in two years time. I would jump in. I will want to join the party once I retire. You cannot take a shot in politics. It is proven, it is self-serving. You have to make a sacrifice. I know, I understand, it has incredible risks. It's my 11th year in politics and has given nothing but that's fine because I have a cause, we all have a cause, we have a belief so therefore we have to engage in politics with strong beliefs, deep values and with that inflamed passion. If you work then only we can address many of these issues in the future. Thank you.

Dil Maya Rai: Going back to the theme “Democracy: a Path to Good Governance” in the closing what I would like to say is as much as parties, members and candidates are working hard to make efforts towards our good governance, voters and electors should also come together. I mean to giving voter education and giving them good access to all the awareness of how a responsible voter should be and not expect the elected members only to run their personal errands or do personal favours but rather expect the elected members to do good to the country as a whole.

I was also a citizen, a voter in the past 10 years before I was elected. I did not expect my elected members to do any personal favours for me because that will be asking too much. But that has become the trend, and that awareness and education responsibility lies on election commission as well as all of us to put institutions in place to educate our voters as citizens. That way only we can really move towards good governance.

Lily Wangchhuk: Our topmost national priority is Gross National Happiness and the fact that it has attracted a lot of international attention. I think there is even lot more pressure on us to make GNH work in our country. And democracy is a means to that end and that again puts us, leads us with more responsibility to make our democracy work. I think as I shared earlier while we are very much on track there are some flaws associated with democracies, some mistakes we are making along the way. And I think what could really strengthen our democracy is probably having more dialogues, public forums together to identify challenges to address some of the flaws, some of the mistakes and targeting a model democracy.

I think this is really key. We as a small nation we cannot afford to make mistakes and it's important that, in a very frank manner, we address a lot of these issues. Also in the past I have had the privilege of participating in many forums like this but we talked and little is documented and taken forward. And I think it will also be useful that any dialogue or conclusion that's drawn from such forum. You know, we should look at taking that further and if there are any good ideas look at possibility of implementing as well.

I think it is also important that we encourage more public discourse. I am sure the society must be engaging with the parliamentarians but I think there is a very little interaction with the political parties. And it's the party that is probably going to be addressing a lot of our concerns whether be it party policies or programmes or being your voice or pushing that to the Members of the Parliament. There is a lot we can do. During elections there are lot of restrictions in the sense that parties don't get to interact with except for the private sector and the rural population. We don't get the opportunity to interact with the educated lot. And I see there is a lot of scope and opportunity for the educated, the think tanks, the CSOs, you know, the people of all walks of life to have more interaction in between elections so that parties would be able to understand the needs and concerns of all sections of the society and be able to address them effectively.

I think on this fragmentation there is a bit of a wrong perception amongst ourselves but when I talk about fragmentation a lot of damages happen during the election with lot of negative campaigns. And I think I agree a lot of that is done by the party workers but I think once you become affiliated with a party, you are permanently stuck with that label and then there is so much mistrust, you know, this person is with DPT, that is DNT so on and so forth.

Not enough has been done over the last 10 years by the two parties that have been in power. And there is a lot of opportunity for the current government to address a lot of challenges we have had in terms of polarisation and fragmentation in healing the wounds. There is a lot we can do and I think it's also important for us to be able to embrace our democracy with a greater sense of unity and solidarity.

Kinzang Wangdi: I would just like to reiterate that democracy and politics go together and politics is basically about human behaviour. So the success of democracy will be dependent on what human behaviour does. Two things I would like to say in terms of the constraints, the thing that we need to address. One is I think we see a lot of frustrations on social media and this is basically about the fundamental rights of the citizens but we never talk about our fundamental duties. I think there has to be a marriage point somewhere, you know, where fundamental duties and fundamental rights is balanced. I think we cannot just cry about and demand fundamental rights without putting your share of fulfilling fundamental duties.

The other thing I think Sonam Tobgay mentioned in his deliberation was the involvement of civil servants in politics. I think they are labelled as 'apolitical' but I don't know what that 'apolitical' means and they are even barred from attending political meetings in common forums. So my suggestion to ECB would be, in the next election, perhaps allow the Local Government officials and civil servants to attend the political common forums at least because I think just for attending I don't think they are going to be political. If they were political, they will be political any way. I mean like Sonam Tobgay said some might be more political than the politicians. So if we can invite some of them at least they know what the parties are talking about? What their ideas are? What their plans are? So this is what I want to impress. This basically has to do with our own human behaviour and that people are more important than the system.

Bhutan Democracy Forum 2019

Panel II



Moderator Sonam Wangmo, Royal University of Bhutan: Now from the 2nd Panel we have a diverse group of people. As the organising team what we had actually said was, we hear from the political parties, but what about the citizens? In the 2nd Panel we have a diverse set of people, a scholar, politician, parliamentarian, *gup* (block headman) and a journalist, la.

The first panelist Kencho Pelzom works as the International Relations Manager at the Royal Thimphu College and before that the two of us worked together in Sherubtse College where she taught political science, la.



Kencho Pelzom, International Relations Manager, Royal Thimphu College: I am not going to define but look at good governance and democracy from one particular angle that is inclusive participation and under the umbrella of inclusive participation as everybody knows that inclusive participation is very important in achieving democracy and good governance at all levels. So under inclusive participation, particularly focusing on Bhutan, I want to look at the ‘apolitical’ status of civil servants, women’s representation in Bhutan with a little bit of stats and youth participations in politics in Bhutan.

So the ‘apolitical’ status of civil servants, CSOs, and bureaucrats if we/I actually did a little bit of research online to see what ‘apolitical’ is and went through all the ECB’s press releases and on their acts on what ‘apolitical’ means. I couldn’t find any definitions but they did mention that civil servants, bureaucrats and public servants have to be apolitical. And I find that very interesting and in this theme of good governance and inclusive participation we leave a lot of people behind. In the earlier panel, a few panelists also discussed about many definitions to being ‘apolitical’.

I found that quite interesting at a personal level because I am a political science tutor myself who has worked in civil service before. According to our constitution only people with undergrad degrees can participate in and stand for elections. So that accounts to somewhere around 11.8 percent and that is interesting in a sense because then, we want graduates who are educated to participate and be politicians, but we want our educated lot to stay away and be ‘apolitical’. That’s a big contradiction I see... because according to ‘Civil Service Report in 2015’, there were some 26,611 civil servants with the annual growth of 1.1 percent that would make around 27,000. And if you would look at our voter registration today in the last elections some 438,000. So if you look at that our voter percentage for civil servants is around 6.6 percent.

The Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) has some 10,000 students and some 1,000 faculty and staff altogether. That accounts for around 2.6 percent voters who are ‘apolitical’ as well. So what does this mean to our democracy because if we cannot participate and be actively engaged in forums and in debates, what are we supposed to do? Are we supposed to just watch and read and make our assumptions from there?

Somebody also mentioned in the morning panel that 'apolitical' means people going online and writing whatever they like. I also feel that sometimes this 'apolitical' status puts this burden on civil servants not talk about politics -- to shy away from politics and this somehow gives this leeway and room to manipulate and write online. I could be, maybe putting two things altogether wrong but it is possible. If you look from this perspective, because if you do not want to engage the educated lot in decisions and discussions -- how else will they participate than on social media? This I see as a big issue. I don't want to talk about how we have been achieving good governance and democracy because it's already been done. But I observed this as something of a major issue for democracy and good governance in Bhutan.

We need to actively engage because being from subjects to citizens, it requires practice. To be a democratically informed citizen requires practice. That means not only voting, but debating about issues, informed debate. And from my teaching experience I know that most Bhutanese generally, we make a lot of opinions, we don't read reports. So if we want to engage people in meaningful debates we need to redefine what this apolitical is or at least define for ourselves, what apolitical means for people who are involved. That's one.

The second one is on women's representation in Bhutan. We are saying that we will achieve SDGs according to the plans of 2013 which would mean 50/50 representation in the parliament. Where we are at is some 15 percent right now and 11 women representation are in the parliament, four in the National Council and 7 in the National Assembly. I am not sure how far we will go with this percentage if you look at it from the first elections we had 8, then we had 7 and 6 and again 11. There is no guarantee that we are going to increase (*women in parliament*).

And this is interesting because PDP pledged in their last government that they would have at least 20-30 women but in 2015 they came out with the report involving other stakeholders that maybe we don't want to reserve a quota (*for women in parliament*). Now I see this not only as a woman but also as political science person. It is very important and there is so much emphasis given on why there has to be equal representation and when we say this there are only 11 women representing Bhutanese women who makes up to according to our population statistics almost 47 percent, it is quite bizarre from a statistical perspective.

Also if we also look at our global gender gap index, our rank is 122 out of 149. And in the measurement indicator in the political presentation we are sixth out of seven South Asian countries. So this is something we really need to think about. I know that most people say we have equal (*representation*) and we tend to say that we are better than South Asian countries but my question is why do we want to compare ourselves with South Asian countries when we are a GNH country? Why can't we look it at differently?

Why do we shy away from this? That's something that I thought was interesting and also again because the current government's pledge is narrowing the gap. I wanted to look at how we define equality in Bhutanese society. Is it a meritocracy? Is it competing and going beyond and leaving our women behind? Where is the GNH value there? Is it equality of opportunity that we are aiming for or the equality of outcome we are looking at? I think there needs to be a little bit of discussions and debates on that because quite often whenever we talk about equality there is not enough emphasis on quality of opportunity versus equality of outcome. What are the differences and what do we want to achieve as a GNH nation?

The third one is the youth. As we know 45 percent of our youth population is 24 and under. According to the ECB democracy club there are 205 and some 7,190 students and I know there were lots of issues raised about whether the students should participate in politics. I am not saying that we should engage directly but I think if you want informed citizens, leaders who are better than now for the future, we need to make them realise what is civic engagement, teach them what is civic engagement and as I said practice is very important and that has to start at schools.

I am not saying that we should have students politically aligned to political parties but there must be other ways of making our students more engaged and active. How do we do that? That is something that I thought would be very interesting. There was a club in Sherubtse College, it was called the STARS: Sherubtse Thinkers And Rationale Society. It was initially started with a political science initiative and it actually ran a signature campaign to change the FINA Forum for the national and international student body. We did the signature campaign in 2009 and in 2018 they elected a female president. So if that is possible there I think it is possible at national level.



Tashi Wangmo, Eminent Member, National Council:

Just about a month and a half ago, the parliament of Bhutan launched a report 'National Human Development' report in the context of 10 years of democracy in Bhutan. And that was jointly prepared with UNDP and over there we have taken stock of things in the last ten years. How far we have come? In terms of human development index trends, we have improved from 0.566 in 2010 to 0.612 in 2017 and among the South Asian countries, there are eight members we are on the 4th position. In terms of poverty level, everybody knows we have improved a lot. We have decreased the national poverty levels from 23.2 percent in 2007 to 8.2 percent in 2017.

And likewise overall unemployment rate has also reduced from 3.7 percent in 2007 to 2.4 percent in 2017. And these are only explorative indicators. But if

we look at the GNH survey 2015 that was conducted by the Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNHC, the GNH index overall has improved from 0.743 in 2010 to 0.756 in 2015. So Bhutanese, are a little happier.

So all these statistics are some indication of whether our democracy has worked in the past ten years or not. I would say we are fairly on track. Nonetheless after listening to the earlier panel, the speakers and the questions that were thrown by our audience here, we are far from being perfect. And then We need to be bold enough to recognise these challenges, the issues, and the risks. For every problem there is always a solution. But then solutions we need to identify who else the responsibility lies with whom?

In the morning I think the dialogue was going more so. In terms of making democracy work, the responsibility lies solely on the political parties or the politicians,. Maybe that was not the intention but somehow it was giving that kind of impression. So I would like to bring those other actors to the forefront. While politicians or political parties or Members of Parliament or parliament may be

in the front line of democracy or maybe they are the face of democracy but then there are so many other actors behind the scene and we need to bring their roles and responsibility to the fore. Those institutions I would like to point out here is, one definitely is bureaucracy in the form of civil service or whatever.

The other one is media. On civil society and the local government for example. I think we are missing out a very important component of our governance, local government and constitutional bodies and judiciary. There are so many actors who can actually collectively you know work towards making our democracy a success. I was happy the first speaker Sonam Tobgay brought up that trust deficit in democracy. I would like to point out here that all these actors also have a role to play in restoring that trust.

One thing I would like to share is, the role of media here. I'm sure here Ugyen (*other panelist*) later on will also have his side of the story but the whole purpose of such a forum is so that we hear out each other and come to a common understanding by listening to each other's reasoning and justification and then also at the same time keeping a space within ourselves.

The media, I look at from both angles. One is in Parliament for example, the kind of job that I do, we use media very seriously in the sense that what is being reported in the media it actually triggers a lot of things in us also. Now what issues do we need to look at? There are many sources that we use to really understand what problems that are faced in the society or economy or whatever but through reports, through formal reports and through presentations or dialogue with agencies but one source that we use, particularly is media reports and that can be a very good triggering factor for us to think about it. So therefore it is very important that media also take on that responsibility.

The other side of media is that it has also projected members of parliament or politicians as some sort of like hyped-up you know, it's always anything to do with Parliament or a politician is bad, bad, bad. I am just speaking out my mind here. When you do more and more of this sort, we probably don't realise it now. There are so many good things happening in politics or parliament but a lot of the times, it is sensational news where it's something bad, it's something that you can thrash the Members of Parliament or politician or whatever. But the long-term implications it will have on the rest of the population is especially our youth who are growing up reading all negativity about the politics or the Parliament or whatever, and more and more you are fed up with this kind of negative feeds automatically you have no choice but to believe in them.

So it's here where objective reporting would really be necessary from the media side. No matter what kind of policies or legislative framework that the politicians or Members of Parliament come up with but ultimately we have to use the bureaucratic tools and mechanisms to enforce them and within that bureaucracy, do we have again those who really know how to implement seriously or whatever is being envisaged, is it being translated into the right content ?

Then civil society definitely what the government can not reach out, they (*civil society*) can fill up the gaps. Ultimately everybody's working towards the betterment of the society and taking the nation forward. Definitely I would like to congratulate in fact what civil society here is doing. Civil society is doing a wonderful job particularly in the context of, in recent times, recently good governance committee in the National Council. We have been carrying out a review of alcohol abuse situation in the country and I was so touched that our civil society how they have actively taken their role to address this in their own little ways by reaching out to the grassroots.

And Local Government definitely is the direct interface between the people, citizens and the central government. Whatever decisions are being taken in the Parliament ultimately through bureaucracy and then Local Government must reach out to the grassroots. So by looking at all of this and then of course not to forget judiciary and constitutional offices which has a separate mandate enshrined in the Constitution . All these actors must come together with a common goal of enhancing or maximising GNH for our country or for our society. So if we have one vision and you internalise it and you put into practice in everyday life, every activity single moment that you live with, there is nothing that we cannot achieve. All we need to really be aware of is the responsibility that each one of bears. Thank you.



Nubi Gup Ugyen Tenzin Trongsa Dzongkhag:

A very good morning to everyone who is present here today. I am really thankful for the opportunity provided by BCMD and Royal University of Bhutan to talk about “Democracy: a Path to Good Governance”. The way to “Democracy: a Path to Good Governance” has been discussed thoroughly by the first panelists representing political parties and I won’t be talking about it much as they already gave a lot of information .

In my case, I don’t have enough educational background. But the government has assigned me to work with people in local communities and I am going to talk about how government works with the local communities. It has been 35 years working in my profession, without changing my position I have served in the same organisation. During the time

from 90’s in the difficult times I have been a Drungpa in Phuentsholing and Doroka. I served most of my service in Gelephu, Tsirang, and Samdrup Jongkhar. Those who know me will know that during those times we didn’t have a degree but after the ICSE examination in 1975, after my class 10 I have been placed in this profession based on our merits .

Managing Editor Kuensel Ugyen Penjor: So a long time ago, in 2001 when I joined Kuensel (newspaper) soon after my graduation from Sherubtse college, my mother was very happy. As the eldest son getting a job means a lot of things but she never really understood my job and I never bothered to explain. Working in Kuensel was different. Every night I go home late. After some time she got used to it, so when I go home at 9 PM she thinks I’m home early. But one time she asked me if I’m paid extra or if I was really working. Then I tried to explain my job to her and then she listened to it. “In other words you are a “*phungzay*”. *Phungzay* in dzongkha roughly translates to someone like a troublemaker”.

So I joined Kuensel as a reporter but my mother thought I was the “*Phungzay*”. Why should you tell people that an officer has embezzled money, or there is no drinking water here, or there are potholes on the road? Why would you tell that? With that job she thought that I am going to get into trouble and then she wanted me to become a teacher, a noble profession. But today , this is my 18th year in Kuensel, with a two year break from journalism, today my mom is my best source of new stories. Every now and then she will say why didn’t you write about this? Why didn’t you write about that? And sometimes she would also say, why don’t you put this in Kuensel?



So I wrote this personal story to link it to our theme today, “Democracy: a Path to Good Governance”. I was doing some reading last night and I came across something very interesting which I would want to share. I was going through the Constitution actually and in article 2 on the executive states that the government shall protect and strengthen the sovereignty of the kingdom, provide good governance, ensure peace, security, well-being and happiness of the people. So that provision actually defines the overall responsibility of the government.

And in the words of former Chief Justice Lyonpo Sonam Tobgay who did an analysis on the Constitution, is the chairperson of the Constitution drafting committee. Actually this is a very good book which I recommend everybody to read. So in his interpretations, he says that this provision the

executive envisages a dynamic government for the responsibilities mentioned above, for maintaining peace well-being of the people. So drawing from this interpretation, I want to put it like this, good governance is the basis to ensure that all other responsibilities are fulfilled because there will be no happiness or well-being without good governance as there will be no peace or security without good governance.

I will not give you examples but if you look around every day as soon as you put on the TV in the morning we see a lot of news, unfortunately not good news. You see examples of how democracies are failing or in crisis because of a lack of good governance. The examples are plenty from South Asia to Africa and America. It’s all over the world. And then actually it is the constitutional duty of the government to provide good governance. It is in all the Constitutions but the difference is not implementing it or not living up to the values enshrined in the Constitution.

In our Constitution, good governance is emphasised a lot. In article 15 on the political parties it says that political parties shall ensure that national interest prevail over all other interests and for this purpose shall provide choices based on the values and aspirations of people for responsible and good governance. So personal interest over national interest I think that is the root cause for suffering and conflict. And in Buddhism the usage of “*Nga*” I don’t know how to put it in English but the message is that you should transcend the personal, ‘I’. So in political terms if we can, if the I overshadows We, then we are in big trouble and then it undermines the responsibilities enshrined in the Constitution.

Coming to media, the role of media was recognised long before democracy came in and the immediate thing that we can relate to is the liberalising of media in 2006, two years before Democracy was formally introduced. So from just one paper in 2006, there were three in just about 2 years. Today we are about a dozen newspapers. I’m sure some of you must be thinking ‘Yeah but what are you doing?’ There are expectation especially now with the audience or the readers becoming very demanding. They are becoming sophisticated. They are not interested in bridge inauguration stories. They are not interested in potholes, I mean in training of trainers stories. They want hard news. They want investigations. They want exposes. There is pressure from the public and then every time something happens the first question is where is the media?

However I think, as a senior in the industry, at least in terms of years, I should give some credit to my colleagues in the media. I think we are playing our role. We are questioning the government on their policies, on their decisions, through our articles, through editorials, we have challenged government decisions. We have provided suggestions. The most important thing is that we have provided that platform for the people. I'm happy to say that today a lot of people come to the media. Today we see, every now and then, a lot of people in our corridors with issues they think that the newspapers or the media can bring in, highlight and give them the space and the voice.

There are challenges for many reasons or the media maybe not living up to the expectations, the expectations are really high but I believe our responsibilities first is to the citizens and then we can fulfill their responsibilities by reporting but I think our first responsibility is reporting. We report on ACC findings. We report on Royal Audit Authority finding, even if we cannot do our own investigations or exposes and then when we put this to the public forum. I think there are a lot of questions asked on decision-making.

We had examples recently about the hospitality and the entertainment budget. So at the same time I would also like to say that the media is becoming bolder and if not more responsible as Dasho Tashi pointed out. There is hope among the people. Our readers are now demanding more. In the context of today's theme I would like to borrow a word from our former Chief Editor Dasho Kinley who is here. He believed that democracy is not our goal, our goal is good governance, to serve the people and I think the media will play an important role in this.

Back to my mother, I have made enemies, I have lost friends but I'm happy that at least there are people who trust the role of media and then they come to the media. So on this note I would like to end. Thank you.

Question & Answer Session:



Question: What is your advice to the students to help promote and understand the importance of good governance?

Tashi Wangmo: What is advice to students like you? It will be very difficult for me to give advice as such, but again I want to re-emphasise on the points that I have actually have been alluding to in my 10minute statement. The roles of each of those institutions and then who runs those institutions? Who are the building blocks to those intuitions? Individuals. Be it in the form of bureaucrats or private individuals or students for that matter, so it ultimately boils down to individuals. How seriously you want to take on that responsibility of making a system work and when it comes to you as a student I think the message from His Majesty the King in the recent convocation was very clear.

His Majesty is looking for in every individual: professionalism, hard work, trustworthiness. And these three things you can, as a student, instill in yourself. When you grow up believing in these, practicing, internalising, living with it, definitely there is no way, you can go wrong. So I just want to re-emphasise on the characteristics of each individual. Then coming to youth although it was just your just general comment, how do you engage youth in politics? I don't know, my understanding of engaging in politics is not necessarily by being or joining as a candidate. But there are various ways of actually staying engaged. Of course, 50 percent of youth that you have talked about cannot get voted in to represent in the parliament. So you have to, through voting, send your representative to Parliament. And today the system, how it works in a Parliament is at least that I know of, my other colleagues, elected members, they always go back to the Constitution.

I think some of them spend a lot of time in staying in the constituencies, really listening to the issues and problems faced by their constituents. They bring back those issues to the National Council, that's how we work, and we sort things out and see how can those issues be addressed. Not necessarily everything that is raised by the constituents in their respective constituencies can be addressed in a form of deliberation in the Parliament but a lot can be addressed at the local government level or some at the administrative level. So if the youth can also actively participate in those meetings. When the Members of Parliament after you have voted in, when they go back, make sure that they come for the meeting and raise their concerns, right? And then the other one was it always seems to be on the social media grievances that sare being posted.

While on the one hand it's good, for us to understand people are not happy but I was also really reflecting on it and thinking who else could those be? Because if you look at the Members of Parliament, the elected members, they go back to their constituency. They seem to be constantly interacting with people in the constituencies, in the rural areas. Could it not be those from the urban areas, where they are neither in the constituency nor they have the opportunity to meet the elected members directly to raise their concerns and issues? So how do we take care of this floating population? Do they really represent the people in the constituencies and their feelings and sentiments?

Kencho Pelzom: For students I would say because you are a student, and in a few years you are going to be voting, so the only thing I can think of right now for you is read about Bhutan, Bhutanese news, know about it. Get proper information. Don't just look up on social media and look at fake news because most students are very vulnerable to them. And at the same time when you're voting, make sure you know your candidate and the party you are voting for. That would be much more effective for the good governance not directly but indirectly because you have to be actively engaged as a civic person or citizen for making a democracy successful in Bhutan.

I think politics can be defined in so many ways and because we have such a huge youth population. If we look at it, quite often I have worked with youth, especially in the tertiary education for the past 10 years. I see a lot of our young students always want to say like, they want to get in to politics, or suddenly achieve a lot within a short span of time, which is never possible especially in politics or in any field. So I think actively participating in any civic forum or even at local level in your village is very important and that I would convert you into being youth who is politically active, not just standing in election but taking your village, your *gewog*, your *dzongkhag* or your community forward at any level possible.

Question: For deaf students getting information and news is difficult so how are media houses planning to reach out to deaf students?

Ugyen Penjor: Honestly, I have no answer, la. I think she's talking about the newspapers. We encourage a lot of schools to subscribe to Kuensel and I think there's also a scheme for schools where they get a cheaper price than the real subscription price. I doubt if a lot of schools are keeping newspapers in their library because I think this is important not only students with physical disabilities but even otherwise. I think one young lady from there was also asking about how to engage in good governance, and I think one way is to keep in touch with what is happening in the country and one good way is through the mainstream media.

Question: Is there a freedom for media in Bhutan?

Ugyen Penjor: I think in Bhutan, we are a lot better. In that sense we are a lot better compared to a lot of countries and recently maybe you must have also seen that, how the freedom of media ranking has also improved. I take pride in being able to call the Prime Minister or the ministers late at night, ring them up and then ask questions. But the problem stressed earlier is it's actually not with the elected government or the politicians, the problem is with our civil servants. There are rules that discourages civil servants from talking to media. A civil servant will have a lot of information about his department but he's not expected to, I mean he's not allowed to talk to media about this. So in terms of freedom I think here rather than the government trying to clamp down on media, it's not, sharing the information with the media.

Question: More people are taking on to social media for news and information because the mainstream media is falling behind so how is media houses trying to live up to people's expectations of informing and educating the masses?

Ugyen Penjor: When you talk about expectations I really don't know what the expectations are? If you're talking about spicy discussions on what you see on Bhutanese forums then I would say I would apologise for not being able to provide that but I think it is important to know how to differentiate social media and mainstream media. Even in Kuensel we consider social media as a challenge to mainstream media not solely because of the competition from breaking news or being the ultimate source of news but ours is mostly how the stories and the articles are shared on social media. When we talk about expectations I think you cannot expect the mainstream media to be as ... we cannot be spicy as the social media like Bhutanese forums. But in terms of freedom I think freedom also comes with some responsibility like someone said when I stretch my hand, my freedom ends where his shoulder begins. So while there is freedom I think it also comes with responsibility.

Question: Would you like to suggest or share some mechanism of the sort to prevent or at least change the negative perception of politics spread through media to youth?

Tashi Wangmo: I do see contradicting comments coming, on one hand somebody saying is there a freedom of expression? Is that adequate enough? Then on the other hand how do we cut down on the unnecessary material that's been projected in social media, so these are two conflicts which is again good, diversity of views and that's the beauty of democracy. And no matter how we try to justify our stand it will be very difficult to make everybody happy, 100 percent of the people happy.

There will still be people whose needs will not be addressed. Coming back to whether there is freedom of expression or not. Today I think we should be very grateful that we have the social media freely available to anybody and that's why we do see a lot of comments, anonymous and sometimes good, most of the time, bad. So that was the message I was trying to give earlier on how we maybe either more and more into this kind of negative information we send it out through media and social media or whatever and people read more and more of such materials how the mindset of these people start actually believing the politicians or the elections being bad, so that kind of impact. I do foresee it's going to happen. So, therefore, whoever uses while on the one hand, you can use your freedom but responsibly. You not only just you meet your demand but also see what kind of impact it may have on to others, you know others who are reading it. So it again comes down to individual censorship, individual's policing. So this is, that is the only way I could share right now.

Kencho Pelzom: I will just speak from the perspective of a citizen and how do we make democracy successful? Like I mentioned earlier democracy definitely requires a lot of practice so does political culture, civic engagement. And because there is youth and politicians and aspiring politicians here I think we need to think about what kind of citizens do we want to be? Do we want to be the entitled citizens? Or do you want to be that active citizens, who take proactive roles, who do not need to be told what to do? Even when you can consume media news of any sort and I think I would like to just summarise my talking points on this that what kind of citizens do you want to be, so that democracy in Bhutan is progressive?

Tashi Wangmo: Just like how I started in my opening statement, democracy is not just for politicians, parliamentarian or political parties. There are a lot of actors who can make it a success and eventually leading towards good governance and which again enhances Gross National Happiness of the country.

Ugyen Tenzin: My request to all youth who are here is that after your degree, you're welcome to the rural areas. We have a lot of jobs for you, a lot of engagement. Please don't look to civil service or business. Come down to villages, we will work together, form a good team, you will grow up from a local leader to a national level. That is my request and because to have a good parliamentarian you have to have a basic understanding of your locality. If you have a good knowledge of your locality to be a leader of *gewog*, *chiwog* whatever it maybe, then you will grow up to be a leader of a nation with good governance. That is my request.

Ugyen Penjor: Instead of talking on the role of media, I see a lot of young faces here and then the issues they brought out, it's very important, very pertinent issues. And actually to be honest, this is my first time facing a big crowd like this where a majority is youth and then the kind of interest that you have in the political discourse and on the media, it is really impressive. In this panel I think two things that came out really strongly, the need for the policy to include people with special needs and also how to engage the youth in this kind of dialogue and forum.