

Bhutanese Youth take Democracy Beyond the Vote

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Bhutan's National Assembly Speaker, Lyonpo Jigme Zangpo at the IDD event held in Sherubtse College 2014 International Day of Democracy (IDD): *Engaging Young People on Democracy*

15 September 2014, Sherubtse College: People between the ages of 15 and 25 constitute a fifth of the world's population. This year's theme for the International Day of Democracy - "Engaging Young People on Democracy" – focused on the global youth population, and highlights the challenges and opportunities of young people to engage in democratic processes. The event was held at Sherubtse College, jointly organized under iGNHaS's lead with the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy (BCMD), the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB), and UNDP. Within the broader theme of youth engagement, Sherubtse College also emphasized a national theme of "*everyday democracy in the digital age*".

The IDD provides an opportunity to review the state of democracy in the world. Democracy is as much a process as a goal, and only with the full participation of and support by the international community, national governing bodies, civil society and individuals, can the ideal of democracy be made into a reality to be enjoyed by everyone, everywhere. According to UNDP Resident Representative Christina Carlson, "the day serves to remind us of the importance and value of democracy for the sustenance and vitality of our human society and its progress."

Bhutan's National Assembly Speaker, Lyonpo Jigme Zangpo said, "Democracy is not only an exercise in civic duties, it is also about strengthening sovereignty, ensuring liberty, and securing justice for the well being of the people." Further adding that, to "harness the power of the youth, young people need democracy and democracy needs the youth."

Today, in many developing countries the proportion of youth exceeds that of more developed regions – with a majority of young people living in low and middle-income countries. In Bhutan, 56 percent of the population is under the age of 25, most of whom live in urban settings. In this context, youth engagement and participation in the democratic process is not just desirable, but absolutely necessary. To this end, it is important to ask - do Bhutan's young people consider politics irrelevant and politicians not worth listening to? Are today's young people becoming more powerful advocates for democratic change than any generation before them? Perhaps both perspectives contain elements of truth.

Together with institutions like iGHNAS, BCMD and the Sherubtse College on the commemoration of the International Democracy Day – UNDP hopes that young Bhutanese will have a say in decisions that affect their lives and hold decision-makers to account, based on inclusive and fair rules, and practices that govern social interactions.

Events included a book unveiling from iGHNAS, titled "Improving Women's Participation in Local Governance: An explorative study of women's leadership journeys in eight districts of Bhutan". This was followed by a Q and A session on digital democracy, a demonstration of new voting initiatives by the ECB, a presentation on the BCMD Youth Initiative, and a panel discussion made up of youth and academics on Everyday Democracy in the Digital Age.

Moderated by UNDP's Annamari Salonen, Inclusive Governance Portfolio Manager, students and academics from Sherubtse discussed digital democracy with ECB and BCMD Youth Initiative representatives. During the panel discussion, Professor Dorji Wangchuk noted: "Cyber democracy is not a choice, it is already a reality". Professor Wangchuk recognised the potential of digital democracy for increased interaction, but also called for a mass education and awareness campaign on the use of social new tools to prevent the inappropriate use of social media.

As Sonam Peday, student at Sherubtse, put it, "it is up to us if democracy becomes a beautiful butterfly from a cocoon, or if it becomes a moth. It depends on every one of us whether democracy fails or succeeds"

Phuntsho Namgay from BCMD, said "democracy is not a spectator sport" explaining that the two main ways for youth get disengaged are boredom and apathy.

Studies show declining faith among young people in politics as we know it, with decreasing levels of participation in elections, political parties and traditional social organizations across the world. This applies to both established and emerging democracies. At the same time, informal, youth-led movements for democratic change are on the rise in a number of countries – including in fragile states. Using new communication channels in social networks, young people are making their mark on democracy-building in untraditional ways.

Taking into account the above factors, UNDP with other development partners is encouraging young women and men to engage in politics and policy-making; democratic change; recognize the importance and relevance of today's existing political systems; and to find innovative solutions for engagement. Efforts in the international community's supportive role are also changing to make room for young people.

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