



## **An old Monarchy, a new democracy and gross national happiness in Bhutan : a holistic approach for sustainable development.**

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### **Abstract**

In the 21st century Bhutan has re-established its geopolitical identity by adopting a new system of government, a new constitution and also creating a global interest in their policy of Gross National Happiness. Leo Rose, in his seminal 1977 work, "The Politics of Bhutan", observes that there is "no other political system presently extant with which the Bhutanese polity is comparable in either its 'traditional' polity or its process of political development." In 2008 Bhutan adopted a democratic system of government, against the will of the people by the monarchy. The new democracy still works with the consent of the 5th King of Bhutan, as the Head of State. The new governance structure of Bhutan is intrinsically tied to its holistic state policy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), which Bhutan adopted as a state policy, pioneered by the 4th king in 1972. This paper discusses the process of democratization in Bhutan and role of the monarchy in the new governance. This paper examines how the new governance structure of Bhutan, has succeeded in adapting to the state policy of GNH. The paper is based on fieldwork in Bhutan, and interviews with government officials including the Speaker of the National Assembly, journalists and other researchers in Bhutan involved with implementing the policy of GNH under the new democratic government. The research seeks to answer the following questions: How has Bhutan made the transition from Monarchy to Democracy? What is the role of the Monarchy in the new democratic Bhutan? How has the new government implemented the policy of GNH? What has been the impact of GNH on the people, including the different ethnicities living in Bhutan? What has been the international response to GNH? Despite challenges, the new governance in Bhutan, has developed a holistic vision of sustainable development for its people under the banner of Gross National Happiness.

**Keywords :** Monarchy, democracy, Bhutan, sustainable development

### **1. Introduction**

Where is Bhutan in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Nestled in the Himalayas, between two giants, India and China, Bhutan's development and transition to a democracy are now watched carefully by a world that has been enamoured by their concept of Gross National Happiness, by a monarchy that gave up its throne in favour of a democratic constitutional monarchy, and also by their emphasis on environmental development and claims to be carbon negative. These are all positives, when the government pays special care to ensure that their subject population are happy and contented and works towards sustainable economic, and health and human development. In June

2018, at the session of the National Assembly, the Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay made an exciting announcement in his State of the Nation Address where along with listing all the progress the country has made since the last election, also mentioned that the population of the country had increased to 735,553, increasing by 8,380 people a year in the last 12 years.<sup>2</sup> An interesting statement embedded in the news report was "Lyonchhen attributed the successes to Their Majesties the Kings for achieving development that has propelled Bhutan out of the least developed countries."<sup>3</sup> This demonstrated the role of the monarchy in the new government, and the process of democratization in Bhutan. This paper will examine

the challenges of the new government and their transition from a monarchy to a democracy and their success in achieving a holistic view of sustainable development.

## 2. The monarchy in Bhutan.

Leo Rose, in his 1977 seminal work, *The Politics of Bhutan*, observes that there is “no other political system presently extant with which the Bhutanese polity is comparable in either its ‘traditional’ polity or its process of political development.”<sup>4</sup> The former Prime Minister of India I. K. Gujral also writes that “the people of Bhutan are fortunate in having as their monarch a man who has attributes of Plato’s philosopher-king.”<sup>5</sup> These comments are testimony to the role of the monarchy in Bhutan. Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel who arrived in Bhutan in 1616, unified Bhutan into a nation state with a dual secular/religious system of government as the secular Druk Desi. Since the position was non-hereditary and there was no smooth mechanism for transition, there were intense civil wars, plots and intrigues for many years, and between 1651-1907, not less than 54 Druk Desis held office. In 1845 Jigme Namgyel successfully emerged as the victor, winning secular rulership in 1860. He consolidated his rule over the country and in 1870 assumed powers as the 51<sup>st</sup> Druk Desi, and pacified the entire opposition by force, at his death in 1881.<sup>6</sup> Following him, his son Sir Ugyen Wangchuk who was knighted by the British on account of a successful dispute mediation with Tibet and India, promoted harmony and consensus, and reunified the country.<sup>7</sup>

In 1907, the first hereditary monarch was elected unanimously by an assembly of the “abbot, teachers of the monastic community, the ministers of the council of state, regional governors . . . and the headmen of the public of each district,” thus reaffirming the secular/religious character of the monarchy.<sup>8</sup> Assembly members or “witnesses” sealed their personal consent to the Contractual Agreement of Hereditary Monarchy; significantly, it read:

Now therefore a contract has been drawn up in firm conclusion containing a unanimous agreement made evident to all gods and men, that Sir Ugyen Wangchuk, the leader of Bhutan and Tongsa Penlop, has been empowered as hereditary monarch accordingly we the above mentioned lamas and officials, subjects and followers, great and small, shall place our loyalty and render service and honor to the king and to the succession of his royal heirs. If otherwise there should be any kind of accusing talk

arising from evilly disposed rumour or false gossip, then such persons are to be expelled from the common fold.<sup>9</sup> This gave the Bhutanese monarch and his successors a legitimacy, ending the earlier civil disputes of succession and laying the foundations of a lasting peace that would mark the Bhutanese monarchy in future years.

This period of peace continued under the third and the fourth king. The third king, H.M. Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, who was known as the “father of modern Bhutan,” initiated key processes of democratic institutionalization in 1953 by convening the National Assembly, drafting the Thrimshung Chenmo (Supreme Laws), and later, establishing the Royal Advisory Council.<sup>10</sup>

Many Bhutanese historians, like Karma Ura, attributed these developments to “an enlightened and progressive monarchy”. Ura writes that, “there was no domestic political compulsion or pressure for reforms. The impulse for reform originated in the monarchy itself.”<sup>11</sup> The fourth king H.M. Jigme Singye Wangchuck went a step further and issued a royal edict and devolved executive powers to a council of ministers in 1998, while still retaining powers as the Head of State, this assuming a new role for the Himalayan kingdom.<sup>12</sup> Amongst the Council of Ministers, whoever got the highest votes from the then National Assembly members becomes the head of the government with the title of the Prime Minister. This marked a new chapter not only in Bhutanese and Himalayan politics, making way for the new democracy in the country.

## 3. Development of democratic institutions in Bhutan

The process of democratic change in Bhutan, began to be introduced during the reign of the third king, H.M. Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, who was very modern in his outlook and introduced reforms and restructuring of the government to keep pace with a rapidly changing world. He started the process of decentralization, which would be continued by his successors. His first step was the establishment of a High Court, separating the executive from the judiciary, and ‘reorganized the judicial system on modern lines (i.e., combining and reconciling traditional Bhutanese approaches with select imported ideas of more modern origin).’<sup>13</sup> After he created the National Assembly (Tshogdu) in 1953, he proceeded to ‘increase its role and powers’.<sup>14</sup> This was followed by other changes like the establishment of the Royal Advisory Council in 1965, the creation of a Council of

Ministers in 1968, the abolition of serfdom and land reforms in 1952, with a mass education system, that became the crux of the new developments, generating an elite and qualified bureaucracy. Bhutan also undertook a national planning program with the Five Year Plans, prioritizing infrastructure development, followed by education and health reforms.<sup>15</sup>

The First Five Year Plan (FYP) was established in 1961; Bhutan has now completed its 11<sup>th</sup> FYP (July 2018-June 2023, 12<sup>th</sup> FYP).

The fourth king, who is a much revered person in Bhutan even today, introduced changes whereby the monarch relinquished his position as the head of the government and gave the National Assembly the go ahead to take new responsibility for the government of Bhutan. He went a step further and empowered the National Assembly with the authority to pass a no-confidence vote on the monarch, which was in fact introduced by the third king, and encouraged the drafting of a written constitution, which was started in 2002. The decentralization of political power was taken to the grassroots level by two significant acts passed by the National Assembly, that established the Dzongkhag Yargay Tshogdue Chathrim (District Development Committee [DYT] Act) and the Gewog Yargay Tshogchung Chathrim (Block Development Committees [GYT] Act).<sup>16</sup><sup>15</sup> Mathou writes that, ‘One could view these acts as the fruition of a process initiated in 1981 when the king first established the DYT and individual development plans were prepared for all dzongkhags (districts). Considerable administrative and financial powers were given to dzongkhag administrations.’<sup>17</sup> Now the DYT and GYT’s are known as the local government.

Bhutan’s rural polity and economy also helped in the formation of a democratic system. Unlike many agricultural based communities, a vast majority of the population in Bhutan privately owned agricultural land. In the absence of a non-hereditary ruling elite, until the creation of the monarchy, Bhutan also did not have an aristocracy, or a feudal system. ‘The absence of an aristocracy and past feudal lords, and the empowerment of villagers with the right to private land ownership both have fostered greatly the democratic transitions seen today in Bhutan.’<sup>18</sup>

Democracy in Bhutan can be said to emerge at the village level first, where decisions are made by consensus, all families are represented and matters are debated with the principle of Kha or oratorical skills. The villages are small enough and it is not difficult to achieve a consensus. Wangchuk writes that

the ‘the village *zomdu* embodies what Dahl terms ‘primary democracy’ occurring at the village level.’<sup>19</sup> It was a kind of representative meeting, where every village household representative, irrespective of gender, could express themselves and feel their viewpoint heard. In primary (or town meeting) democracy, the citizens may have a well-justified confidence that they really do govern directly themselves, particularly because participation is not confined to the town meeting proper but is interwoven with the totality of community life.<sup>20</sup>

The village life in Bhutan is one where everyone, not only knows everyone in the small village communities, but also shares in the development of their civic life, making it highly interdependent. Community participation was required in all aspects of village life from building a hut to a wedding or a funeral. An interesting check and balance mechanism is the concept of exiled villages and *Chuko Miko Dum* tool of severe ostracism to socially and economically isolate noncompliant households. Closed hearth/closed water restrictions (*chuko miko du*) were issued to households who did not participate and were not allowed to use the common spring, while other villagers stayed away from the exiled household. This was not a government practice and was banned, but always served as a deterrent to village households, especially wealthy households who did not want to participate.<sup>21</sup>

A much more formal democratic development process emerged in the gewogs, through the GYT acts passed successively in 1992 by the Home Ministry and then again by the National Assembly in 2002. The Gewog is a block of villages often ‘grouped together by traditional and customary affiliations, and in some cases, by tribal and clan lineages.’<sup>22</sup> These gewogs were governed by a *gup* or a headman, which was a non-hereditary position and rotated among village households.

When Bhutan became a nation-state they were brought under the regional governors, functioning as the lowest administrative unit in the state. The acts passed later on establishing the GYT system aimed to bring the rural areas under the planned development programs and also involve them in decision making. In addition to the *gup*, the GYT’s also had other village representative meetings three times a year. With the above acts the GYT’s also began to have more formal powers of requesting development aid and also collecting taxes for rural development. Over the years however, the GYT’s became ‘an extension of the central bureaucracy that has moved into the heart of

rural Bhutan in an effort to devolve certain state powers to the local level.”<sup>23</sup><sup>22</sup> This democratic structure began to be affected by the bureaucratic developments, where the control began to shift to the *Dzongdag* or district administrator, and the people realized they had no power in removing a headman they did not like, who became a village emperor.

#### 4. **The new democracy: constitution and elections**

The century old absolute monarchy in Bhutan technically came to an end in the last week of March 2008. A bicameral parliament constituted on the basis of adult franchise came into existence through elections conducted over a period of four months to the national council (upper house) in December 2007 and January 2008 and to the national assembly (lower house) on March 24, 2008. The national council consists of 25 members of whom five are appointed by the king. The rest represent the 20 ‘*Dzongkhags*’ (districts) in the country. The national assembly consists of 47 seats.

As per the political framework prescribed by the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, adopted on 18<sup>th</sup> July 2008, only two parties were allowed to contest the general election to the national assembly, one government and the other opposition. The two, political parties were the Druk Pheunsum Tshogpa or Druk Prosperous Party (DPT) - Bhutan’ Harmony Party - led by former bureaucrat Jigmi Y. Thinley and the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) led by Sangay Ngedup, the uncle of the present King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, and also a former bureaucrat. The DPT won with a more than convincing margin, 45 out of the 47 seats. As per the election commission of Bhutan around 67 per cent of the electorate participated in the first ever national assembly election on the basis of adult franchise.

The election campaign was generally uneventful due to the non-existence of an autonomous civil society and free media. Also since there were only two parties, the primary round was skipped. The elections to both the national council and national assembly were not on any identifiable ideological plank. Both the DPT and the PDP were competing with each other regarding their loyalty to the king and the existing ruling establishment. Before the electorate they were trying to prove their-enthusiasm and commitment to implementing the vaguely defined ‘gross national happiness’ (GNH) index better than the other. As such the GNH became an important facet of development

for the new government.

#### 5. **Gross national happiness and its implementation and global impact**

“In Bhutan, respect for human rights is enshrined in Buddhist precepts and practice and is in line with the holistic vision of Gross National Happiness,” reports the UNDP in Bhutan.<sup>24</sup>

An online advertising for Bhutan also states: The Kingdom of Bhutan is commonly known as The Last Shangri-la and true to its name, this wonderland nestled in the Himalayas is the seat of Happiness, Peace and Harmony. This was a great title, exotic to the western world and hence a great burden and challenge for Bhutan to preserve. In 2010 Bhutan became known globally as the only country in the world, that rates its progress not on its GDP, but on GNH: or Gross National Happiness. But this concept is not new to Bhutan and is tied intrinsically with its history, state formation and spirituality.

In the late 1970’s, the 4<sup>th</sup> King of Bhutan Jigme Singyay Wangchuck coined the concept into the political discourse which later became famous as Gross National Happiness or GNH. Although the term “Gross National Happiness” was first coined by the 4th King of Bhutan the concept has a much longer resonance in the Kingdom of Bhutan. The 1729 legal code, which dates from the unification of Bhutan, declared that “if the Government cannot create happiness (*dekid*) for its people, there is no purpose for the Government to exist.”<sup>25</sup><sup>24</sup> In 1972 the idea was articulated by the last King Jigme Singye Wangchuck in his famous statement that “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product”<sup>26</sup><sup>25</sup> Since then Bhutan oriented its national policy and development goals towards Gross National Happiness. In 1991 the idea was mentioned in the Five Year Plan (7th 5-year plan pp. 22) and in 1998 the Prime Minister elaborated the idea in his address at the U.N. Millenium Development Summit in Seoul, South Korea (Thinley 1998). These statements did not aim at scientific precision in the first place, but served to indicate a political direction. The Constitution of Bhutan (2008, Article 9) directs the State “to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness.” (GNH Index, 2010). While there is no single official definition of GNH, the following description is widely used:

Gross National Happiness (GNH) measures the quality of a country in a more holistic way [than GNP] and believes that the beneficial development of human

society takes place when material and spiritual development occurs side by side to complement and reinforce each other.<sup>27</sup>

Ruut Veenhoven in his article on “Measures of Gross National Happiness” mentions Jeremy Bentham’s (1789) new moral principle, where he wrote that the goodness of an action should not be judged by the decency of its intentions, but by its consequences on human happiness.

Bentham defined happiness in terms of subjective feeling, as ‘the sum of pleasures and pains’. The word ‘happiness’ in the widest sense, is an umbrella term for all that is good and is often used interchangeably with terms like ‘wellbeing’ or ‘quality of life’, and the degree to which a person enjoys his or her life-as-a-whole. Accordingly, ‘Gross National Happiness’ is defined as the degree to which citizens in a country enjoy the life they live. Individual happiness can be measured by self-report on a single standard question. Hence Gross National Happiness can be measured by the average response to such questions in general population surveys.<sup>28</sup>

From the start it is vital to clarify that GNH in Bhutan is distinct from the western literature on “happiness” in two ways. First it is multidimensional – not focused only on subjective well-being to the exclusion of other dimensions – and second, it internalizes responsibility and other regarding motivations explicitly. As the first elected Prime Minister of Bhutan, Thinley, under the new Constitution of Bhutan adopted in 2008 put it: We have now clearly distinguished the ‘happiness’ in GNH from the fleeting, pleasurable ‘feel good’ moods so often associated with that term. We know that true abiding happiness cannot exist while others suffer, and comes only from serving others, living in harmony with nature, and realizing our innate wisdom and the true and brilliant nature of our own minds. The 10th plan of Bhutan specified GNH by focusing on four pillars: “In order to translate the multi-dimensional concept of GNH into core objectives ... four strategic areas were initially defined” (p.16). These areas, called the “four pillars of GNH”, are: 1. Sustainable & equitable socioeconomic development; 2. Environmental conservation; 3. The preservation and promotion of culture; and 4. Good governance. As mentioned in an interview, Rinchen Wangdi, Director, GNH Commission Secretariat, told me that the “Govt. wants to create the environ meant to provide happiness.”<sup>29</sup> This was a common point that I heard from others, when asked about GNH. The goal of the government with GNH was to create the conditions,

whereby people will have all opportunity to lead a happy and contented life. Happiness became much more than a guidepost or inspiration; it became an organizing principle for governance and policy-making as well. The Gross National Happiness Index is the first of its kind in the world, a serious, thoughtful, and sustained attempt to measure happiness, and use those measurements to chart the course of public policy. These early four pillars created a situation totally unforeseen in Bhutan’s history, political and social future. Well planned by H.M. the fourth king, GNH became a very important aspect of the new government in Bhutan.

The GNH commission was formed to shape public policy and implement every development program in Bhutan. As mentioned by the director, any proposal made by any department, had to include its impact on GNH and sent to the GNH commission for approval. And only after that will it be sent to the Cabinet for final approval. This thus became one major facet of the Monarchy in Bhutan that became an integral part of the new democratic government. However, it is interesting to note that in 2018 Bhutan ranked 97<sup>th</sup> in the World Happiness report (based on a Gallup Poll), scoring 5.082 in the “happy index report”, dropping from its 84<sup>th</sup> rank.<sup>30</sup> This position was based on the report, which was created by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, is based on factors like per capita GDP, social support, healthy life expectancy, social freedom, generosity, and absence of corruption.<sup>31</sup> Bhutan’s critique was that the survey questions were not based on Bhutan’s context like the GNH Survey questions. This is more realistic and shows that this is a work in progress.

## 6. Transition from monarchy to democracy

A former journalist in Bhutan in an interview told me that “that His Majesty the fourth king had timed the movement towards democracy, to coincide with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the monarchy. From 1907-2008, the hundredth year of the Bhutanese Monarchy was chosen to establish the democracy of the country”.<sup>32</sup> Although this has been a movement in the planning since the third king (1951) with the introduction of changes mentioned above, the people of Bhutan were stunned by the announcement of this change. Mathou writes that, “Contrary to most countries with monarchies where royals have resisted democratic politics, Bhutan’s has always been the leading force of change.”<sup>33</sup> And these changes were initiated by the Bhutanese monarchy in a royal edict, passed in 1998,

where H.M. Jingme Singye Wangchuk, “relinquished his role as head of government to the chairman of the cabinet” but remained as the head of the state.<sup>34,32</sup>

Since 1907, the king or *Druk Gyalpo*, was the head of the state and government and had supreme control over the executive, while sharing legislative powers with the National Assembly (Tshogdu). “According to the Supreme Law (Thrimzhung Chhenmo) enacted in 1957, the king’s edicts and ordinances (kadyons) are even above those laws enacted by the National Assembly.”<sup>35</sup>

The king however, maintained control over the security of the country. This edict changed everything and devolved power on the newly constituted Cabinet or National Assembly.

The transition from the monarchy to the new democracy took several years to be finalized before it became a reality. In the first step, monarch gently gave up his own powers as the head of the state. “Although many members of the Assembly pleaded for him to retain chairmanship of the cabinet, the king insisted on renouncing his functions of head of government, and he refused to appoint a member of the royal family in his place as chair as suggested by some members.”<sup>36</sup>

Some decisions had to be made to make a smooth transition. It was decided that the chair of the cabinet, rotating off annually would be chosen from among the cabinet ministers who secured the highest votes from the National Assembly members. Keeping in mind Bhutan’s inexperience with the new parliamentary government, all the council of ministers, looked to the king for support and guidance.

All statements that were made, alluded to the presence of the king in all matters of decision making at the cabinet proceedings. As stated by the Council’s new chair: “While His Majesty would not be present in person at the meetings of the Lhengyel Shungtshog (Cabinet), the cabinet members would continue to be guided by His Majesty in spirit and would depend on his moral support in dealing with issues beyond their understanding.”<sup>37,37</sup> The king on his part made it very clear that he was withdrawing from his role of the cabinet, saying that he had “no intention to indirectly control the functions of the Lhengyel Shungtshog and that members of the cabinet must instead work closely together to strengthen the efficiency of the government and provide good governance to the country.”<sup>38</sup>

These were not just rhetoric, but were articulated by the people that I met and spoke with during my visit to Bhutan. A popular saying, “the command of the King is heavier than the mountain and more precious than

gold” indicates, the Bhutanese people, including the cabinet, held the king in an almost reverent regard”.<sup>39</sup> The king’s direction, guidance and spirit as well as loyalty and “fidelity to the monarchy”, became the key factors of the new National Assembly. This became apparent during a visit to Bhutan, where I had the opportunity to meet with the Speaker of the National Assembly, Lyonpo Jigme Zangpo, who on a tour of the House, showed me the seat of the King. Although H.M. only attended the opening and closing sessions of the parliament, his seat on the dias was a symbol of his royal presence and in essence the guiding spirit of the national assembly. The royal edict also required that the king be kept informed, “on all matters that concern the security and sovereignty of the kingdom.”<sup>40</sup>

Another matter which was important in the discussion of this transition was the “vote of confidence” contained in the edict. The national Assembly could register a vote of confidence at any time, and if by a two-thirds majority the king received a vote of no-confidence, he would have to abdicate in favour of his successor. This was a matter of principle and aimed to “further enhance and strengthen a system of government best suited for the needs and requirements of a small nation like Bhutan to ensure its continued well-being and security, and safeguard its status as a sovereign, independent country.” Over the years, Bhutan’s role as a small nation, between China and India became a growing concern and hence the emphasis on security and stability of the country. This was taken as another major step in the transition to more power to the people, as the vote of confidence, instead of weakening the monarchy, legitimized the regime, and

guaranteed the stability of the country. These changes were initiated by the king himself and resisted by many in the Assembly, with one member asking, “If it is not broken, why ûx it?” To which the king replied, “The future of the country must not be compromised for one individual’s convenience; we must always give more importance to building the institution.”<sup>41</sup>

The process of political transition took 10 years before the elections in 2008. Although H.M. withdrew from active politics, he continued to remain at the helm, guiding discussions on development and taking major security decisions. At the same time, his son and successor, Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, began to emerge into the political scene, embarking on his first political tour abroad.<sup>42</sup> By December 2002, the drafting committee, presented the first draft of the constitution to the king, amidst protests by the

conservative National Assembly that they preferred the continuation of the monarchy.<sup>43</sup> This was formalized in March 26, 2006 when the constitution was released for consultation, and which officially declared Bhutan as a “democratic constitutional monarchy.”<sup>44</sup> The new constitution legalized two political parties only, and enshrined human rights, civic responsibilities, and the pursuit of “gross national happiness,” but debarred from government or constitutional office any individual (including a prospective monarch) who is married to a non-Bhutanese.<sup>45</sup> The last point on the non-inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities, became the only major criticism in an otherwise peaceful acceptance of the constitution. By 2007 Bhutan was all poised to embark on its new democratic journey. The King, in a surprise move in December 2006 abdicated in favour of his son, Jigme Kesar Namgyal Wangchuck, as the 5<sup>th</sup> king of Bhutan, and in 2007 Bhutan had their first trial run of parliamentary elections, with votes being cast for four political parties. By the end of December elections for the upper house, was held with only non-party candidates, while elections for the more representative lower house were scheduled for February 2008.<sup>46</sup> This was the final step in the transition from a monarchy to a democracy. As mentioned Bhutan was still unsure about its new status and even 10 years after the fact, the Bhutanese officials and people still refer to this “new Democracy” as a gift from the king. In an interview, an official of the government, who preferred not to be named, told me that when people protested, the king is believed to have said, “Today, tomorrow or maybe 30 years down the line, you may have a good king. But what if that changes, and a future king does not have the same interests for Bhutan or its people, as me or my successor. The people of Bhutan have to take the future of their country in their own hands.”<sup>47</sup>

### 7. Holistic vision of sustainable development

When asked about the success of the new government and Gross National Happiness, the common response from the officials I spoke to was that the goal “was sustainable development”. This is linked to the heritage of the country as a Buddhist monarchy and the preservation of that heritage and keeping its Buddhist identity had become the prime focus of the socio-economic and political developments of the nation. This Buddhist identity is apparent everywhere you go in Bhutan, from the small monasteries to the large statue of Buddha at Buddha’s point overlooking Thimpu. When the fourth king

proposed the novel concept of GNH instead of GDP he “made an explicit commitment to preserve Bhutan’s cultural heritage and natural environment.”<sup>48</sup> As such all national goals and policies were formulated based on the spiritual and emotional well-being of the people and not just economic development and material progress. Here Mathou writes that “this choice has given Bhutan a unique opportunity to view modern advancement in the context of genuine sustainable humane development rather than just income growth.”<sup>49</sup>

David Zurick also writes that, “The philosophical underpinning of life in Bhutan is upheld by Buddhist precepts that emphasize the pursuit of emotional and spiritual fulfilment, prosperity to meet essential material requirements, and a respect for the natural order. These concerns are made explicit in the kingdom’s approach to development, which focuses on enriching people’s lives by meeting basic needs, enlarging economic and social choices, preserving cultural traditions, and promoting environmental conservation.”

<sup>50</sup> Very aptly said, this was reiterated by all respondents that I spoke with including the speaker of the Assembly. In the same light, Dasho Phuntsho Rabten, Eminent member of the National Council, appointed by the King, said “ultimately everything boils down to sustainable development. Bhutan is very conscious about all development, both culture and the environment and is trying to preserve and promote the vibrancy of their culture as well as their identity as seen in the 5 principles and nine domains of GNH”.<sup>51</sup> The attitude towards this model is to achieve a holistic and sustainable development by including every rural and urban sector. Despite the subjective nature of the idea of happiness, which might stand in the way of success, its essential qualities-economic, spiritual, and emotional well-being-translate specifically to development strategies: economic development, environmental preservation, promotion of cultural identity, and judicious governance.<sup>52</sup> These became the guideposts of the nation and Dasho Rabten mentions that “the king was very serious and systematic. All policies were aligned to focus on that”<sup>53</sup><sup>51</sup> Bhutan focuses on their above national goals by putting the people at the center of development, by expanding their freedoms of choice, aspiration, and creativity. However, everyone was aware of the contradictions inherent in measuring happiness. The government document states that “No one can guarantee human happiness, and the choices people make are their own concern. But the process of

development should at least create a conducive environment for people, individually and collectively, to develop their full potential and to have a reasonable chance of leading productive and creative lives in accord with their needs and interests” (RGB 2000, 13). This was also reiterated by every official I spoke with.

As Zurick writes, “Rather than attempting to derive a measurement of such an elusive concept as GNH, as countries do with Gross National Product or the United Nations does with the Human Development Index, Bhutan aims instead to create the conditions within which personal satisfaction can be attained, specifically in the four essential components of development identified above, and attempts to substantiate progress toward those conditions .”<sup>54</sup>

As such Bhutan’s sustainability platform is directly related to the country’s overall development. Environmental protection, whereby the forest reserve has been increased to 71% in the last few years, is intrinsically tied to health, education and wellbeing and to every program, from food production to educating the young to prepare them for the future. This quest for sustainable development, and the enactment of environmental policy in Bhutan, is thus in direct compliance with the country’s concept of GNH (RGB, 2000, 22). Thus every policy planned since the 1970’s and more so now with the new government, beginning with environmental conservation, to education, preservation of cultural values and traditions is very holistic in concept and design. Not to say that it is not fraught with challenges. The first challenge to this success is inherent in the hierarchical nature of the Bhutanese society and polity, as well as its ethnic and religious composition. The new constitution has been criticised as being non-inclusive, especially of its minority communities. There is also the criticism of Bhutan’s policy towards the eviction of the minority Lhotshampa, Nepali ethnic community from the south, where cultural preservation and “One Nation, One

People” policy has come under serious attack. Other challenges as seen by many in Bhutan today, is related to the success of the democratic system: Rural-urban migration, impact of internet and modernization, the privileges assumed by the ministers, and non-representation of the voice of the poor and minorities. The lack of political preparedness and a population that lacks political awareness has also been pointed out. Yet, one can see the direction that this government intends to take and hopes to take all its citizens with them, as much as possible.

## 8. Conclusion

But at this time, we are looking towards what can be achieved and how Bhutan has transitioned into this new system. Whatever the outcome of the change in Bhutan, one thing for sure is that it has set a new trend in development model that other countries of the world are keen to emulate. Ten years into a new system of democratic government, the king still has a big presence in the country, its spirit and in the minds of the people. The influence of the monarchy in Bhutan is embedded in its ethos and will never go away, and will always remain a very important part of Bhutanese identity and culture. This can be seen as a strong bond among the government, the people, and its development goals. The ten years have been great as far as economic and material progress is concerned. Despite the focus on GNH, Bhutan’s GDP growth is at 7.1% in 2018, according to the Asian Development Bank.<sup>55</sup> There has been tremendous infrastructure development and Bhutan’s image in the international world has improved far beyond the country’s imagination. As Zurick very aptly writes “Fundamentally, Bhutan is a lesson in practice; its challenges notwithstanding, the country has embarked on a strategy of development that is unique in the world and for that reason worthy of examination.”<sup>56</sup>

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**Foot notes**

<sup>1</sup> Bhutan's population is 735,553' Kuensel, June 26, 2018, '<http://www.kuenselonline.com/bhutans-population-is-735553/>)

<sup>2</sup> Bhutan's population is 735,553' Kuensel, June 26, 2018, '<http://www.kuenselonline.com/bhutans-population-is-735553/>)

<sup>3</sup> Leo E. Rose, *The Politics of Bhutan*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), in Tashi Wangchuk, *The Middle Path to Democracy in the Kingdom of Bhutan, Asian Survey, Vol. 44, No. 6 (November/December 2004)*, pp. 836-855, University of California Press

<sup>4</sup> "25 Years a King: His Majesty King Jigme Singay Wangchuck 1974–1999" (Thimphu: Center for Bhutan Studies, 1999), p. 8. in Tashi Wangchuk, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Tashi Wangchuk, *The Middle Path to Democracy in the Kingdom of Bhutan, Asian Survey, Vol. 44, No. 6 (November/December 2004)*, pp. 836-855, University of California Press.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Aris, *The Raven Crown: The Origins of Buddhist Monarchy in Bhutan* (London: Serindia Publication, 1994), 96

<sup>8</sup> Michael Aris, *The Raven Crown: The Origins of Buddhist Monarchy in Bhutan* (London: Serindia Publication, 1994), 96

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Karma Ura, "Development and Decentralization in Medieval and Modern Bhutan," in *Bhutan: Aspects of Culture and Development*, eds. Michael Aris and Michael Hutt (Gartmore, Scotland: Strachan-Kiscadale, 1994)

<sup>11</sup> His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, "Royal Edict," Kuensel, August 29, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Thierry Mathou, *Political Reform in Bhutan: Change in a Buddhist Monarchy, Asian Survey, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Jul. – Aug., 1999)*, pp. 613-632, University of California Press C

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. One of the most significant systemic reforms introduced under the present king has been administrative decentralization, which was initiated in 1981 through the establishment of 20 District Development Committees (Dzongkhag Yargye Tshogchung). This was followed by further decentralization to the block (gewog) level in 1991 with the introduction of 202 Block Development Committees (Gewog Yargye Tshogchung). This has now increased to 205 GYT's.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Tashi Wangchuk, *The Middle Path to Democracy in the Kingdom of Bhutan, Asian Survey, Vol. 44, No. 6 (November/December 2004)*, pp. 836-855, University of California Press C

<sup>19</sup> Robert A. Dahl, *After the Revolution? Authority in a Good Society*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), in Tashi Wangchuk, *The Middle Path to Democracy in the Kingdom of Bhutan*, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 44, No. 6 (November/December 2004), pp. 836-855, University of California Press.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> UNDP, Bhutan. *Human Rights: Strengthening Legal Protection in Bhutan*, ([http://www.undp.org.bt/human\\_rights.html](http://www.undp.org.bt/human_rights.html))

<sup>24</sup> Opening Address of 'Educating for Gross National Happiness' Conference: Lyonchhen Jigmi Y. Thinley, Thimphu, Bhutan

7th December, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Priesner, Stefan, *Gross National Happiness – Bhutan's Vision of Development and its Challenges*, Programme

Officer, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Thimphu, Bhutan. 1999:28.

<sup>26</sup> Opening Address of 'Educating for Gross National Happiness' Conference: Lyonchhen Jigmi Y. Thinley, Thimphu, Bhutan

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<sup>27</sup> Veenhoven, Ruut, *Measures of Gross National Happiness*. Published in: OECD: *Statistics, Knowledge and Policy. Measuring and fostering the progress of societies (2007)*: pp. 231-253.

<sup>28</sup> Personal Communication, Rinchen Wangdi, Director GNH Commission Secretariat, Thimphu Bhutan, July 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Yangchen C Rinzin, Bhutan ranks 97th in World Happiness Report, <http://www.kuenselonline.com/bhutan-ranks-97th-in-world-happiness-report/>

<sup>30</sup> Yangchen C Rinzin, Bhutan ranks 97th in World Happiness Report, March 16<sup>th</sup> 2018, Kuensel Online. <http://www.kuenselonline.com/bhutan-ranks-97th-in-world-happiness-report/>

<sup>31</sup> Personal communication, former Journalist in Bhutan, July 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Thierry Mathou, *Political Reform in Bhutan: Change in a Buddhist Monarchy*, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Jul. -

Aug., 1999), pp. 613-632, University of California Press

<sup>33</sup> Tashi Wangchuk,

<sup>34</sup> Thierry Mathou, *Political Reform in Bhutan: Change in a Buddhist Monarchy*, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Jul. -

Aug., 1999), pp. 613-632, University of California Press.

<sup>35</sup> Thierry Mathou, *Political Reform in Bhutan: Change in a Buddhist Monarchy*, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Jul. - Aug., 1999), pp. 613-632 Published by: University of California Press. There was a precedent when in the absence of the king, a representative of the crown (His sister in 1975) presided over the N.A. In 1998, a royal councilor proposed that the Crown Prince, Dasho Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, be appointed chair.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Lhengyel Shungtshog can be called either Cabinet or Council of Ministers, while the committee consisting of

the six elected ministers is to be referred to as the Coordination Committee of the Council of Ministers. Both

bodies are chaired by the same person, who is formally called the chairman of the Lhengyel Shungtshog.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Thierry Mathou, 2002

<sup>40</sup> “Proceedings of the 76th National Assembly” (Thimphu: National Assembly Secretariat, August 1998).”

<sup>41</sup> Thierry Mathou, Bhutan in 2001: At the Crossroad, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (January/February 2002), pp. 192-

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Hutt, Nepal and Bhutan in 2004: Two Kings, Two Futures, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (January/February

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Hutt, Nepal and Bhutan in 2005: Monarchy and Democracy, Can They Co-exist? *Asian Survey*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (January/February 2006), pp. 120-124. University of California Press.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Hutt, Nepal and Bhutan in 2005: Monarchy and Democracy, Can They Co-exist? *Asian Survey*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (January/February 2006), pp. 120-124. University of California Press.

<sup>45</sup> John Whelpton, Nepal and Bhutan in 2007: Seeking an Elusive Consensus, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (January/February 2008), pp. 184-190, University of California Press.

<sup>46</sup> Personal Communications, Journalist in Bhutan, Feb.2016.

<sup>47</sup> Thierry Mathou, Political Reform in Bhutan: Change in a Buddhist Monarchy , *Asian Survey*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Jul. - Aug., 1999), pp. 613-632 , University of California Press.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> David Zurick, Gross National Happiness and Environmental Status in Bhutan, *Geographical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 4 (Oct., 2006), pp. 657-681, American Geographical Society.

<sup>50</sup> Dasho Phuntsho Rabten, Eminent member of the National Council (Upper House of Parliament of Bhutan), appointed by His Majesty, the fifth King, in a personal communication, July 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Zurick, 2006.

<sup>54</sup> Tshering Dorji, Bhutan among fastest growing economies in Asia: ADB, May 11, 2018, <http://www.kuenselonline.com/bhutan-among-fastest-growing-economies-in-asia-adb/>

<sup>55</sup> Zurick, 2006

