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Kingdom of Bhutan: A Tale of Vision, Resolve,  
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by

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# The History of Institutional Change in the Kingdom of Bhutan: A Tale of Vision, Resolve, and Power<sup>1</sup>

Marian Gallenkamp<sup>2</sup>

*Keywords: Bhutan, democracy, institutional change, monarchy, critical juncture*

## ABSTRACT:

*The Kingdom of Bhutan is probably the most understudied country in South Asia, and yet its unique history holds plenty of intriguing and scientifically important facts and aspects. In this paper due attention will be given to the development of Bhutanese institutions from the establishment of a Buddhist theocracy in the 17th century, through the establishment of hereditary monarchy at the beginning of the 20th century to the transition to democracy at the turning of the millenniums. Contextualizing the more recent events within the broader continuity of political developments in the world's last Buddhist kingdom is of crucial importance in understanding the underlying trajectories that account for change. These trajectories, it is argued, are primarily shaped by perceptions of threat to national security, unity, and sovereignty, which manifest themselves in critical junctures upon which Bhutan's farsighted rulers have repeatedly and deliberately come up with innovative institutional changes while at the same time retaining a crucial link with the nation's history and tradition.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Bhutan, tugged amidst the Himalayas between India and China, has in recent years drawn some limited international attention to itself by joining the club of the world's democracies and by advocating and promoting a new approach to development, based on its unique concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH).

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However, due to its long, self-imposed isolation, its remote location and small size, it has long been treated by scholars with a benign neglect. Alternatively referred to as the last Shangri La, the Land of the Thunder Dragon, or Land of Happiness, these romanticised and mystified views have only seldom produced proper country studies on Bhutan. The lack of scholarly attention is even more astonishing taking into consideration the unique history of that small nation, which started from a Buddhist theocracy, transformed into an absolute monarchy, and slowly, step by step, reduced the absolute character of its monarchy to create a form of democracy that does not only differ from its South Asian neighbours, but also from the rest of the world. Upon its path through the tumultuous and eventful centuries, Bhutan always managed to maintain its sovereignty and independence vis-à-vis Tibet, the British, China, and India. The major ideological currents sweeping the world all-around it left Bhutan untouched. Though the developments and changes that occurred in Bhutan over the decades were substantial, and at times epochal, the overall framework of politics in Bhutan has shown a remarkable continuity, always connecting the past with the present. It is in this light that this paper seeks to draw attention to the development of state institutions starting from the very beginning of unified Bhutan in the 17th century and spanning a bridge right up to the first decade of the new millennium. In doing so, the following pages are to be seen as a necessary historical study without which a concise and satisfying analysis of the more attention-capturing transition of recent years cannot be properly understood. This holds true even more so, as a genuine transition towards democracy has been generally acknowledged, but its result has left many scholars puzzled at best and unconvinced at worst.

#### **METHODOLOGY: CONTEXT, PATH DEPENDENCE, AND CRITICAL JUNCTURES**

This paper aims at contextualizing the more recent events in Bhutan within a broader historical picture. While the author believes this is necessary in order to understand the scope and dimension of recent changes, not all approaches that try to explain them deem such a broad historical context as vital. Certainly, regime changes do not occur in a vacuum, but apart from the long and evolutionary processes of democratization in Western Europe, most transitions in the latter half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century appear to have taken place rather rapidly and so theory has more and more focused on short term trajectories to explain change (Cf. Capoccia & Ziblatt 2010: 932f.). It should be noted that, while path-dependency certainly is the approach of choice, the paper will not follow a strict and rigorous theoretical model here. It is neither its aim nor in its scope to provide for an encompassing comparative historical analysis, as suggested and elaborately explicated by e.g. Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer 2003: 10ff.). Instead the path-dependency is understood in a more flexible way by referring to the continuity of norms and values throughout a changing internal and external environment. However, as such studies always run the risk of getting lost in mere description or exhaustive idiographic explanations, I choose to follow a middle-path between analyzing tale-telling changes and developments in all spheres of Bhutanese life and causal explanations for some exceptional innovations within the political-institutional realm. While the choice of what to include and what to exclude ultimately falls back to the author's subjective judgment, my approach has been designed to eventually lead and draw attention to one of South Asia's most intriguing and yet so broadly understudied puzzles: Why did Bhutan embark on a transition to democracy at the time it did?

Broadly lending from James Mahoney's approach to path-dependency (Cf. Mahoney 2001a: 3-29; 2001b: 11ff.), the paper will develop and present the

following argument: critical junctures, that is decisive periods in Bhutanese history with a great potential for change, were repeatedly caused by internal or external threats to its sovereignty. While the first two critical junctures identified (roughly the period between 1865 and 1907 and the period between 1949 and 1962) led to major institutional and political changes, the third one (approximately 1985 to 1993) had the reverse effect. Instead of institutional and political innovation the Bhutanese state reacted by extensively and persistently promoting and enhancing its earlier chosen path. Eventually, major change, i.e. Bhutan's transition between 1998 and 2008, occurred again, but this time without the facilitating effect of a critical juncture.

## **BHUTAN THROUGH THE AGES: FROM THE FIRST SHABDRUNG TO THE 5TH DRUK GYALPO**

Beginning with Bhutan's "first great historical figure" (Federal Research Division, L. o. C. 1993b), Ngawang Namgyal, and chronologically following the reigns of the Dragon Kings, the following sections shall provide for an encompassing analysis of institutional change and innovation and guide the reader through the history of Bhutan to enable a better understanding of the particularities that come with this unique case.

### *The Unification of Bhutan and the Establishment of a Buddhist Theocracy*

The story of a distinct and sovereign Bhutanese nation begins in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the arrival of Ngawang Namgyal, who had been the prince abbot of the *Drukpa* monastery at Ralung in Tibet. Due to internal rivalries and a challenger to his position as the 5<sup>th</sup> incarnation of the *Gyalwang Drukpa*, he was forced into exile in 1616 and went south to the erstwhile lands known as *Lho Mon* (southern land of darkness). This story of monastic infighting might have ended here if it was not for the great ambition and vision of Ngawang Namgyal, the exiled monk and former head and leader of the *Drukpa Kagyu* school of Tibetan Buddhism, who was to become the first *Shabdrung*<sup>3</sup>. In fact he "may be included among those few charismatic leaders of the human race whose life and death are the immortal saga linked intimately with the destiny of a people" (Sinha 2001: 52). He was probably the first prominent figure in Bhutanese history to transcend the nebulous myth of spirituality and religiosity (Sinha 1991: 45-46; and 2001: 37) that surrounded so many others by eventually creating and leaving an enduring worldly legacy.

Ngawang Namgyal began to gather the support of other *Drukpa* monasteries and subdued those who would not follow him voluntarily. He "relentlessly [pursued] a policy of geographical unification" (Choudhuri 1993: 67), and ultimately succeeded in bringing the diverse monasteries, their clergy and the influential families and clans under his control. Once the fighting for control and spiritual supremacy stopped, the *Shabdrung* attended state affairs related to nearly every aspect of life in Bhutan. Jean Claude White, a British colonial officer, who was to become an important player in the history of Bhutan later on, cites a Tibetan chronicler who describes Namgyal as being the "pastor, abbot, psalmist, rector, superintendent of carving (for printing purposes), architect of State and monastic buildings, overseer of bookbinding and other embellishments of the Kagyur library, settlement officer, chief commandant of the forces for quelling foreign aggressions, chief protector and ruler of his own adherents and followers, chief avenger and punisher of those who were inimical to the cause of Buddhism and the public peace. He was all these in one person, and fulfilled the duties right thoroughly and

<sup>3</sup> Note that in various sources the title of *Shabdrung* is also referred to as *Shabdung*, *Zhabdrung*, *Dharamraja*, or *Dharmaraja*.

efficiently” (White 1909: 103). Though *Shabdrung* Namgyal wielded all power in his hands, he created a dual administrative system composed of a religious and a civil branch to be able to concentrate on spiritual matters, to exercise proper and efficient control, and to provide governance for the newly formed state. He understood that “for the functioning of a state political administration ought to be distinguished from religious activities. And unless the function of the religious and administrative functionaries were not well defined overlapping jurisdictions might generate almost self-defeating strife and recriminations” (Choudhuri 1993: 68).

The religious branch of the system was headed by the *Je Khenpo* (lord abbot, also referred to as *rJe-mKhan-po*). He had the authority over the Buddhist monasteries, enforced strict adherence to priestly vows, directed monastic studies, and presided over important religious ceremonies. Opposite to the *Je Khenpo* was the *Druk Desi* (also referred to as *Deb Raja* or *sDe-srid*) as the head of the civil branch of administration. The civil branch of government was established to look after all worldly affairs of the realm and to generate the required revenue for the monastic system, so that the clergy could devote itself completely to spiritual and ecclesiastical matters. A Privy Council, made up of regional leaders and the *Shabdrung's* confidants, elected the *Druk Desi* every three years and he was assisted by a council of ministers (*Chinlah*). Administration and revenue generation was also enhanced by limited decentralization. The country was divided into provinces<sup>4</sup> and districts, the result of which was that especially the provincial governors, *Penlops*, became more and more powerful over time. The first *Shabdrung* also commissioned the construction of massive fortresses (*dzongs*) at strategically important places, which also served as strong administrative centers. These enclosed communities usually housed both, secular and religious institutions.

Besides the administrative superstructure of the new state, Ngawang Namgyal also introduced and formalized his ‘rules of the game’. The laws that he promulgated and codified were concerned with many aspects of life. Guided by theological principles as well as practical considerations, the laws formalized the interconnectedness of the deep Buddhist spirituality and the common necessities needed in organizing and ruling a state. Besides the prohibition and punishment of the so-called ten impious acts, and the parallel so-called sixteen acts of social piety (White 1909: 301ff.), all of which were derived directly from Buddhist thought, the laws also contained practical codes of conduct regulating the interaction between the different branches of government and between the government and the peasantry.

Form and structure of the theocratic government were possessed of both *Dharma* and *Samsara*. While *Dharma* in Buddhism generally refers to the teachings of Buddha, Mahayana Buddhism, to which the *Drukpa* school belongs, also takes into account the teachings of the great *Bodhisattvas*, an ideal that certainly was pursued by the *Shabdrungs* and later kings (Ura, K. 1994: 26). *Samsara* on the other hand though deeply engrained in Buddhist religion relates to the part of the Bhutanese polity and its laws, which were concerned with regulating everyday life and conduct. While on superficial view the dual administration appears as a diarchy, closer scrutiny reveals that it was in fact a tightly interconnected synthesis (Sinha 2001: 63), where the boundaries were ambiguous and the clergy often occupied high-ranking positions in the temporal administration. Also, lay elements in high positions within the temporal administration, i.e. the *Druk Desis*, were usually required to take the priestly vows once they were elected. The foundation and justification of this union of church and state (*chos srid zung 'brel*) stated that

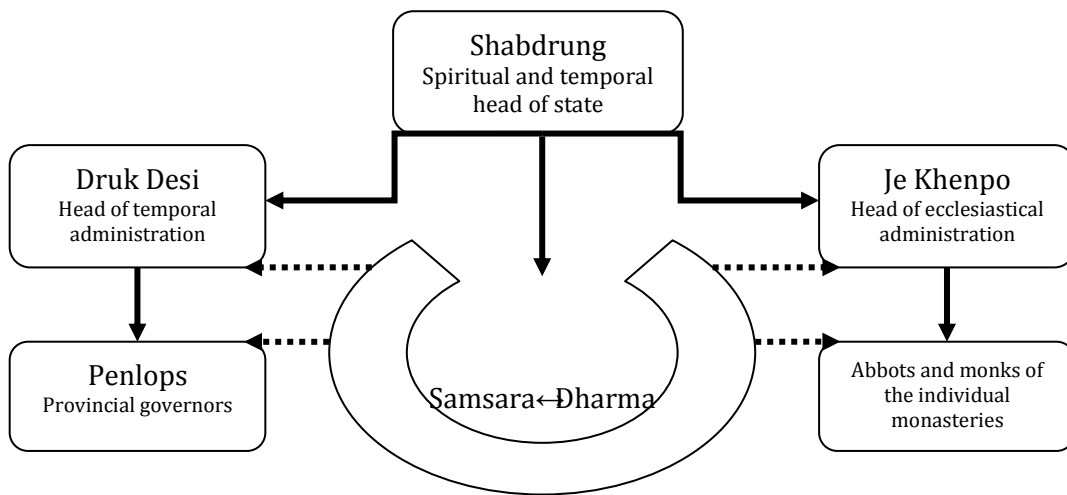
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<sup>4</sup> Note that the number of provinces mentioned by authors differs between three and five, depending on the source.

Bhutan was an “earthly realm, founded by the *Zhabs-drung Rin-po-che* Ngag-dbang rNamgyal (1594-1651), an emanation of the *Bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara, to rule for the welfare and ultimate salvation of his citizens” (Ardussi 2000: 11). Again, welfare is certainly something related to *Samsara*, while salvation is related to *Dharma*.

Even though the first *Shabdrung* succeeded in centralizing and consolidating his power within Bhutan, the country faced serious external threats. The Tibetans invaded Bhutan at least four times during Namgyal’s reign and although they were repeatedly defeated, the threat of foreign invasion loomed over the country in the coming centuries.

Figure 1: Bhutan’s structure of government from 1616 to 1907<sup>5</sup>



#### *Factionalism, Rivalry, and Civil War: Towards the First Critical Juncture*

The administrative system that Namgyal introduced in Bhutan worked well during his time. However, its major shortcoming manifested itself from 1651 onwards. That year Ngawang Namgyal died, but his death was kept a secret for almost 50 years (Sinha 2001: 58f.). In the tradition of great Buddhist lamas it was said that the *Shabdrung* had gone into retreat. As the title of *Shabdrung* was not hereditary but based on his body, mind, and speech incarnations, his death left a precarious power vacuum. Because the identification of Namgyal’s incarnations was obviously a matter of religious affairs conducted by monks but the position of *Shabdrung* wielded enormous temporal influence, the amalgamation of elements from both branches of administration caused intense struggles and factionalism within the religious and temporal elites. Factionalism and rivalries were further intensified by the provision that the *Druk Desi* had to be elected every three years. Having the authority over state affairs and above all the ability to distribute resources, the position gained influence on the one hand, but was heavily contested on the other. Even though a number of Namgyal’s successors were identified<sup>6</sup> over the course of time, none had the power and creative ability to shape the state and rule effectively. The vacuum left by the first *Shabdrung* was gradually filled by the *Je Khenpo*, *Druk*

<sup>5</sup> Source: the author’s own design.

<sup>6</sup> Again note that there is no accurate number of incarnations. Cf. Sinha, Awadhesh Coomar (2001), *Himalayan Kingdom Bhutan: tradition, transition, and transformation* (New Delhi: Indus Publishing), 70.

*Desis*, and the *Penlops*, all of them becoming more and more powerful over time. As the religious branch had to rely heavily on the civil administration to provide for resources and income, the latter gained even more control of the state apparatus and soon rivalries within and between different levels of the elite began to spoil the inner stability of Bhutan. Grown accustomed to their new influence and reluctant to give back power into the hands of the *Shabdrung*, religious and civil elites failed time and again to name actual incarnations of Ngawang Namgyal. All this led to “constant civil war, plots, and counterplots, and no less than 54 *Druk Desis* held office between 1651 and 1907” (Wangchuk 2004: 838). Of the 54 *Druk Desis* that headed the temporal branch of government, 35 were faced with revolts and 8 were assassinated. The situation deteriorated considerably in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as these 100 years alone saw the reign of 31 *Druk Desis*, of which 24 experienced revolts and four were assassinated (Choudhuri 1993: 75-80). However, although a unified Bhutan existed merely on paper and the administrative system was severely flawed, it showed a remarkable continuity despite inner instability and civil war<sup>7</sup>. What eventually broke this ‘continuity’ was the growing contact and conflict with the British colonial power<sup>8</sup>.

In 1864/65 Bhutan saw itself compelled to fight a war with the British over the so called southern *duars*, the fertile plains at the southern foothills of the Himalayas. Although Bhutan lost this short but fierce war and had to surrender parts of its territory in Sikkim, Assam and Bengal, it was able to maintain its sovereignty *vis-à-vis* the British. On 11 November 1865 a treaty between Bhutan and the British, signed at Sinchhula, ended the conflict over the *duars* and Bhutan had to cede considerable parts of its territory to British India for which it was compensated by an annual sum of 50,000 Rupees. After 1865 there was next to no contact between the British and the government of Bhutan for the next decades. The internal conflicts, revolts, and civil wars continued and were even fueled by disputes over how to handle the British. Within this entire struggle for power, resources, and control, Ugyen Wangchuck, the young *Tongsa Penlop* whose father had commanded the Bhutanese army that fought the war in 1864/65, emerged as the new national ‘strongman’. He probably showed a similar ambition in pursuing his aims, and a similar vision towards restoring peace and order in his country, as the first *Shabdrung* had done. Above all he realized that it was necessary to cooperate with British India, if Bhutan was to maintain its independence. A growing Chinese assertiveness with regard to the Himalayan region, and the British policy to consolidate India’s northern borders, began to significantly threaten the status of Bhutan. With the Chinese in Tibet looking south towards Bhutan and British India faced with a more or less hostile neighbor that was plagued by internal instability, the stakes for Bhutan were high (Rahul 1997: 8f.). On the one hand the Chinese might very well have taken advantage of the chaotic situation by exerting its influence beyond the Tibetan border. On the other hand British India was concerned with the consolidation of its northern borders, and a civil war riven Bhutan could not provide for the stability or buffer that was required, which in turn could have convinced the British that a sovereign Bhutan was no longer in their interest.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 71-73.

<sup>8</sup> The British colonial officer Jean Claude White gives a detailed account of relations between the British and Bhutan. He also reiterates the former missions of Bogle (1774), Hamilton (1775 and 1777), Turner (1783), Pemberton (1838), and Eden (1864) to Bhutan, a compelling account that cannot be elaborated on here. Cf. chapters XX and XXI in White, Jean Claude (1909), *Sikkim & Bhutan — Twenty-One Years on the North-East Frontier, 1887-1908*. Delhi: Low Price Publications, 237-85.



These circumstances constitute the first critical juncture, upon which important choices were made that would lastingly alter the institutional setup of Bhutan. But there is still one frame missing in the picture to explain the institutional transition from Buddhist theocracy to monarchy. Realizing that “the dual political system was obsolete and ineffective” (Federal Research Division, L. o. C. 1993a) and that “all possibility of smooth continuation of the *Drukpa* theocracy had been exhausted” (Sinha 2001: 102), Ugyen Wangchuck had to find other ways to secure Bhutan’s sovereignty and to preserve its distinct culture. He did so by aligning himself with the British following the death of the last *Shabdrung* in 1903 and he defeated his remaining adversaries within the country. In 1904 he accompanied the British mission of Younghusband to Tibet and mediated a compromise between the government in Lhasa and British India. For his services he was awarded the title of *Knight Commander of the Indian Empire* (KCIE). The man sent to Bhutan to honor Sir Ugyen and present him with the title was Jean Claude White, the political officer of the British Indian government in the state of Sikkim. This is probably one of few instances in history where the right persons were in the right place at the right time. White had become very fond of Bhutan and was fascinated by the country and its people, perhaps even admiring it. Though he was aware of his duties as a colonial officer and the responsibilities that came with his position, he had a genuine interest in Bhutan and did not reject its uniqueness out of pure colonial arrogance (White 1909: 233). Together with Ugyen Wangchuck, these “two men of vision [...] were fired with imagination for an established order in Bhutan” (Sinha 2001: 102). A friendship (White 1909: viii) between the two developed and it was through this relationship that the Tongsa Penlop was able to secure the support of British India to establish a hereditary monarchy in Bhutan, building the foundations for peace, tranquility, and development.

Finally, in 1907, he forced the last *Druk Desi* to abdicate. Even though Ugyen Wangchuck was, at first sight, striving for political power and influence during the preceding decades, his concern and commitment for the country and its people was genuine. In late 1907 “an assembly of leading Buddhist monks, government officials, and heads of important families unanimously chose Ugyen Wangchuck as the hereditary king of the country”.<sup>9</sup>

#### *From the Consolidation of Monarchy to the Second Critical Juncture*

The Hobbesian character of the creation of hereditary monarchy in Bhutan is an intriguing aspect in itself (Gallenkamp 2010b: 4), but what is most important about it is the notion of contract<sup>10</sup> by which both, Hobbes’ *Leviathan* and Ugyen Wangchuck were vested with absolute powers in exchange for a rule that is committed to their subjects and the safeguard of peace and stability for the nation. Though Ugyen Wangchuck certainly attained his position partly by force and submission, “the decision to establish monarchy appears to have been genuinely popular not only among those responsible for taking it but also with the public at large” (Aris 2005: 98). Tashi Wangchuck writes, that “this contract between the ruler and the ruled legitimized the authority of the king, and Aris writes that it was a ‘voluntary undertaking entered into by free negotiation’ to end the ‘incessant feuds’ of succession and ‘above all else to achieving lasting peace’” (Wangchuk 2004:

<sup>9</sup> Hofmann, Klaus (2006), *Democratization from Above: The case of Bhutan*, Democracy International 2. Available at <http://www.democracy-international.org/fileadmin/di/pdf/papers/di-bhutan.pdf>. (accessed on 01.04.2011)

<sup>10</sup> Comparing the contracts yields interesting similarities. Please refer to chapter 17 of Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* and to the translation of the oath of allegiance to the king in White (1909), 226 f.

838). On the king and his commitment to the country Jean Claude White, after witnessing the coronation, writes “Sir Ugyen is a man of particular strong character, who has [...] piloted Bhutan through a series of revolutions to a state of peace and prosperity, who has the welfare of his country at heart and thinks of it before all things. [...] I am certain his rule will be entirely for the benefit of his people and their country” (White 1909: 230).

With Ugyen Wangchuck coming to power as the first *Druk Gyalpo*, the dual system of administration came to an end and authority was centralized. The position of *Shabdrung* was abolished, with its ritual functions conferred to the *Je Khenpo* and its political functions assigned to the king. Even though the position of the *Je Khenpo* remained, it lost most of its influence regarding all matters of state affairs. Also, the position of the *Druk Desi* was abolished and its administrative and secular functions were conferred to the Dragon King (Sinha 2001: 76). The first king also initiated a very cautious process of gradual modernization by introducing two western-style schools and encouraging commerce and trade with India. On the other hand he fostered the traditional religious base of the country by “revitalizing the Buddhist monastic system” (Federal Research Division, L. o. C. 1993a) and repairing “many historical monasteries and temples in the country” (Rahul 1997: 13). Relations with the British improved considerably and the King even attended the Delhi Durbar in 1911. The treaty of Phunakha, signed in 1910, granted political independence to the Kingdom of Bhutan. The British would not interfere in Bhutan’s domestic affairs and administration, while Bhutan would consult the British on matters of external relations. Also, the annual sum that Bhutan received in compensation for the loss of the southern *duars* was doubled, providing for more resources to spend on development. Thus the foundations were laid for Bhutan to embark on an independent, sovereign, and undisturbed path of development.

In 1926 King Ugyen Wangchuck died and his son Jigme Wangchuck ascended to the throne and became the second *Druk Gyalpo*. Though initial fears that his succession to the throne might be challenged from within the royal family did not come true, an incarnation of the *Shabdrung* appears to have endangered the stability of the new system. However, despite the fact that the incarnate *Shabdrung* sought the help of Gandhi in India and even of the Chinese in Tibet, the matter was resolved by his suspicious death in 1931 (Rahul 1997: 15; Sinha 2001: 78). He continued the cautious modernization policy of his father, and further centralized administration and authority. He also began to reform the tax system in order to reduce the burden for the peasantry. However, overall there occurred no major changes in the old feudal structure of Bhutan’s economy.

The country remained largely isolated from the rest of the world, thus able to maintain its distinct and self-chosen path of development. After the independence of India, the status of Bhutan was once again in question. The British had deliberately chosen to keep Bhutan’s status ambiguous. While it was not formally part of British India, Bhutan was informally treated as a princely state. This situation became a bit clearer in 1935 when the Government of India Act was introduced and had no adjudication over Bhutan. In fact, the British deliberately tried to prevent any modern development in Bhutan and ‘helped’ the country to remain in its self-chosen isolation (Sinha 2001: 106). It took two years of negotiations during which Bhutanese officials came into contact with the ‘modern’ world and Indian elites, until India recognized Bhutan’s independence and the Treaty of Friendship between the Government of India and the Government of Bhutan was signed in 1949. By this, India inherited the British prerogative over Bhutan’s external policy while it granted the kingdom independence and sovereignty on all internal matters.

While in the final years of the second king's reign and in the first years thereafter no imminent threat to Bhutan's security or sovereignty existed, the momentous changes that took place within the region during this period must have had a profound impact on the king and the crown prince. Suddenly the British with whom Bhutan enjoyed limited but good relations and who had been somehow protective of Bhutan were gone. To the south a newly independent India took shape with all the horrors and fighting of partition. To the north the newly founded Peoples Republic of China quasi annexed Tibet with the consent of India. Maybe this was already enough to constitute a critical juncture for the new king in 1952, or maybe he acted in anticipation of the changes that had already happened and were still on the way. He might also have been influenced by his wife who had enjoyed a western education. Regardless, the new king must have realized that given the enormous changes and the growing instability in the region, Bhutan's survival as an independent state was once again at stake (Sinha 2001: 79). Soon after Jigme Dorji Wangchuck ascended to the throne after his father's death in 1952, he started reforms that were unprecedented in the 45 years of the Bhutanese monarchy.

*Embarking on the Path of Modernization and Making a Stand against Reactionaries*

While the first two kings of Bhutan concentrated primarily on securing the power and legitimacy of the monarchy and started careful modernization and development, and at the same time sustaining the traditional foundations of society, it was the third *Druk Gyalpo* who "initiated key processes of democratic institutionalization" (Wangchuk 2004: 838). Under his rule from 1952 to 1972, the system of government changed considerably. Jigme Dorji Wangchuck was "dedicated to reform and restructure [...] the existing political and economic system to allow the kingdom to adapt to new challenges from a rapidly changing world" (Mathou 1999: 614). By its isolation all major political currents sweeping the world in the first half of the twentieth century, be it capitalism, socialism, communism, or liberalism, have had no impact on the Bhutanese polity and political culture (Mathou 2000: 230ff.). Influenced by the decolonialization of South Asia, the founding of the People's Republic of China and its annexation of Tibet, the king became however convinced that some form of modernization had to take place in the economy and also within the political sphere. Again, like the first king, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck was not alone in his vision for Bhutan and was supported by a unique and important friendship. He visited Indian Prime Minister Nehru in 1953 and again in 1956. In 1958 Nehru made a historic visit to Bhutan together with his daughter Indira, which saw him take many days of travelling on horseback before he reached the new capital of Thimphu. The king "looked upon Nehru as more than a mentor" (Rahul 1997: 28), the "personal equation between them was unique" (Ibid.) and it was through this bond that the third *Druk Gyalpo* gained the necessary support (and probably also courage) to embark on this important path of modernization.

The pace of reforms under the third Dragon King accelerated considerably. In the economic sphere he very soon abolished slavery and serfdom in 1956, combined with an extensive land reform aimed at granting the newly freed slaves their own land with which to make a living. He also abolished the payment of taxes in kind in 1954 and generally brought tax-paying into line. From the 1960s onwards, modernization and development was further formalized in five-year-plans, an idea that certainly emanated from the good relationship between the king and Prime Minister Nehru. The first plans were also almost completely financed by India. They focused primarily on the improvement of infrastructure, e.g. building a net of major roads from North to South and East to West that were accessible throughout the whole year. These roads were also thought to link Bhutan closer to India in order to promote and enhance trade between the two countries, especially after Bhutan closed

its borders with Tibet and withdrew its representatives from Lhasa following the events in 1959 and 1962. Also, Bhutan gradually moved away from international isolation beginning with its accession to the Colombo Plan in 1963 and formally applying for UN membership in the late 1960s, which was granted in 1971. Membership in international organizations was always encouraged and sponsored by India. After strengthening its infrastructure, the focus of development shifted towards education and healthcare, thus once again showing the commitment of the monarchy to the wellbeing of the Bhutanese people.

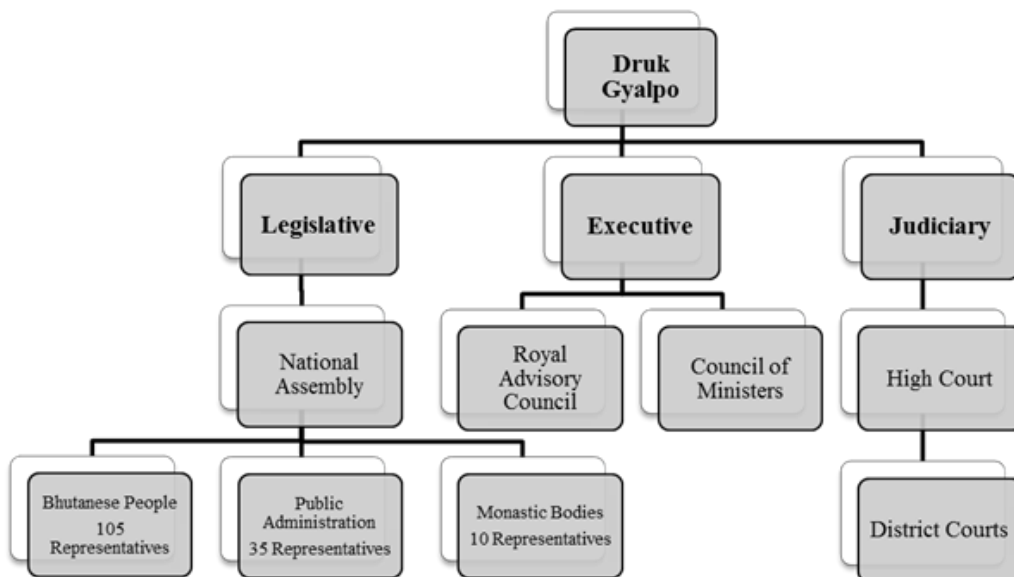
The political development under the third king started with the beginning of his reign and even before social or economic modernization took hold in the country. In order to differentiate the political system he first separated the judiciary and legislative from the executive. The High Court was created, but the king remained the highest appellate authority and nominated judges to the court. In 1953 the National Assembly (*Tshogdu*) was created. It consisted of 110 delegates and was enlarged to 150 delegates in 1960. One distinct feature of this first parliament was its tripartite design. As the Bhutanese tradition of consensus had to be translated into the changing political system, the three main sources of legitimacy of the political system, i.e. the clergy (though not being engaged in Bhutanese politics since the introduction of monarchy, but still influential part of traditional Bhutanese society and culture), the bureaucracy (being both “the instrument of the monarchy in the development process and the incubator of the modern elite” (Mathou 2000: 242)), and of course the people, were represented in the National Assembly. The king nominated 35 representatives from the bureaucracy, 10 members were chosen by the monastic bodies, and 105 representatives were elected on the basis of consensus by the village heads and adult representatives of each household. The number of representatives varied throughout the years. The delegate’s term of office was three years. Obviously this mode of selection does not qualify as an election in the western sense as suffrage was highly restricted and far from universal. However, it resembled strikingly well the overall principle guiding modernization and development. Change was initiated gradually in order to give the Bhutanese people the opportunity to adapt to the changes and to preserve the cultural and traditional foundations of society. In this line, the agenda for the upcoming sessions of the National Assembly was usually first discussed on the village level. Representatives held meetings throughout the country in order to get to know to the needs and demands of the people. Based on these gatherings they reported back to the capital and the agenda for the coming session was established. Even though universal suffrage was not in place at this time, the principles of consensus and deliberation ensured that everyone was heard (Ura 1994: 31-33).

The competencies of the legislative branch of government were constantly expanded while the consensual basis of politics was ensured by the requirement of a two-thirds majority to make decisions. However, the king had a veto on all acts and decisions made by the assembly until 1968, when he voluntarily relinquished this right. One of the first tasks for the newly established National Assembly was to deliberate the draft of a new set of laws called *Thrimshung Chonmo* (Supreme Laws), which combined the pragmatism needed in governing a modern state with the traditional foundations as laid out in the first Shabdrung’s laws and regulations. This progressive body of laws guaranteed many rights and freedoms to the people and was finally passed in 1959. It became the primary source in the process of codifying all other laws, technically moving the society and system away from adjudicating justice by precedence and custom towards a rule of law (Ibid.). Along with the codification of laws, the judiciary was reformed as well. What is even more astonishing is the introduction of a triennial vote of confidence in king, an element absolutely unique to quasi-absolute monarchies. The differentiation and

empowerment of the executive led to the creation of the Royal Advisory Council (*Lodoi Tshogde*)<sup>11</sup> in 1965, which advised the king and served as a “coordinating body between the political institutions and the people” (Winderl 2004: 6). Finally, in 1968 the Council of Ministers as a consultative body to the king was introduced.

However, the rapid transformation in all spheres of Bhutanese society did not come without any costs. While the king was willing to relinquish some of his powers, hand over more and more responsibilities to elected or independent bodies, and embark on a path of modernization that benefitted the people but also threatened to uproot them from their traditional ways of living, there were next to no demands for these reforms within the country. The king saw himself reconfirmed about the necessity of these bold steps, especially when relations between India and China deteriorated and led to war in 1962. But for large parts of the traditional elite his steps were too fast and too far-reaching. The person they identified to be the king’s main ally in the modernization process was the Prime Minister of the Royal Government. The position had been created in 1958 to be able to receive the Indian Prime Minister on an equal level and was held by a close relative of the king, Jigme Palden Dorji. However, like the *Druk Gyalpo* he was a very progressive man, and as head of the evolving executive branch of government the most visible person responsible for the reforms. “The old guard, therefore, decided to act by assassinating the man most closely identified with the new order” (Rahul 1997: 26). Following his assassination on 5 April 1964 while the king was away in Switzerland, the conspirators sought to take over power which was prevented by the timely return of the king. A second attempt by a group of civil and military officials took place the same year on 16 December, while the king was back in Switzerland for treatment of his health problems. Again Jigme Dorji Wangchuck rushed back home and was able to prevent worse. Realizing that the popularity and authority of the king were still undiminished, an attempt on his life was made on 31 July 1965 (Ibid.).

Figure 2: The political system of Bhutan as established by the third *Druk Gyalpo*<sup>12</sup>



<sup>11</sup> Like the National Assembly (NA) the Royal Advisory Council was a tripartite institution. Consisting of eight members, five being elected by the NA, two by the monastic bodies, and one nominated by the king, it was clearly design to ensure the tradition of consensus in the new polity.

<sup>12</sup> Source: the author’s own design

*When Vision Meets Power: the Reign of the 4<sup>th</sup> Dragon King and the Advent of Democracy in Bhutan*

The process of ongoing development and modernization in the economic and political sphere continued without interruption under the fourth king of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who ascended to the throne in 1972, being only 17 years old, after the sudden and early death of his father the third *Druk Gyalpo*. The capacity and outstanding charisma of the new king must have been visible from the very beginning. Instead of establishing a Council of Regency, as usually prescribed in the case of an heir to the throne being under the age of 21, the National Assembly passed a motion to refrain from doing so.

The king reintroduced his veto rights in the National Assembly and abolished the vote of confidence soon after he came to power, but these steps appear to be of a precautious nature given the events of the mid-1960s. No one opposed this move and thus he was able to consolidate his authority despite his young age. Regarding his politics he appears to have been as enlightened as his father in his vision to advance his country and people. He showed an enduring commitment to the wellbeing of the nation and seems to have planned Bhutan's modernization and eventually democratization with great foresight. The main pillars of his policy were the creation of a concept of national ideology to foster the nation's identity, a process of decentralization and finally the devolution of his own powers to lead and guide the country on its last steps towards democratization.

The horizontal differentiation of Bhutan's polity is one of the major achievements of the fourth Dragon King and can be seen as the first (and second) step in carefully opening up the political system and eventually introducing democracy. Beginning in 1981 decentralization in two stages provided for a better administrative capability and for more and genuine possibilities of participation for the people in the process of policy formulation. Also, it further strengthened modernization and development of the largely rural areas outside the capital of Thimphu and the other few urban areas.

In 1981 Bhutan was divided into 20 districts (*Dzongkags*) and District Development Committees were set up in each of them, conferring administrative responsibility from the central government to the local level. In 1991 further decentralization was implemented by subdividing the districts into blocks (*Gewogs*) and again a Block Development Committee was set up for each of the 201 blocks. Through the process of decentralization the coordination of development was significantly improved as the Block and District Development Committees were provided with a substantial autonomy in distributing financial resources to modernization projects, which in turn could be better formulated by taking into account the direct needs of the predominantly rural population (Mathou 2000: 244). The committees played a key role in the formulation of the Five-Year-Plans, as these were no longer drawn up by the central government, but put together from the individual assessments of the districts and blocks. Besides the aspect of a better coordinated and more efficient modernization, decentralization also enabled the population to participate in the decision making process, as matters of importance, personal grievances, or any other subject relating to life in the districts was discussed in an open manner and decisions were once again made on the basis of consensus.<sup>13</sup> This helped in promoting political awareness among the traditionally apolitical

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<sup>13</sup> A very comprehensive description of the processes and work of the district and block development committees can be found in Ura, Karma (1994), 'Development and Decentralisation in Medieval and Modern Bhutan', in Michael Aris and Michael Hutt (eds.), *Bhutan: Aspects of Culture and Development* (Gartmore, Stirlingshire: Kiscadale), 39-44.

population. It also activated civil society and created a substantial stock of social capital on which future efforts of more direct democratization were able to build. The people's involvement in the procedures of what Dahl calls 'primary democracy' (Dahl, R. A. 1990: 52) also showed the people that values and principles like justice, liberty, and equality, in the way they were derived from the Buddhist tradition, were also compatible with political modernization. Thereby apprehensions against the ongoing changes in the societal and political sphere (Wangchuk, T. 2004: 840 ff.) could be reduced. Like the representatives for the National Assembly, the representatives to the Block and District Committees were directly elected, though suffrage referred to the family or household heads. In finalizing the process of decentralization, the judiciary was also subdivided into different courts on block and district level.

While decentralization and the connected administrative changes took place alongside a steady economic modernization, the king realized that if he did not want to share the fate of his father, i.e. to be suddenly faced with a disgruntled and dangerous opposition within the elite, and also to avoid a popular upheaval by the people who might have gotten disillusioned or unsatisfied by a modernization that took away their traditional way of living, he had to formulate and implement an overarching development concept that would be able to integrate the antithetical claims and demands of tradition and modernization.

The concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) structures, formalizes, and combines the substance of policy goals as aspired to by the *Druk Gyalpos*. First introduced in the 1980s by Jigme Singye Wangchuck, it basically combines modernization and conservatory policies. Its essence is that economic development in particular and modernization in general have to take into consideration the well-being of the people not only in material terms but also in spiritual and social terms. It thus resembles the constant commitment of the monarchy to be responsive to the well-being of the people, while at the same time guiding Bhutan on a path of development in order to adapt to the challenges of a changing world. The current interpretation of GNH identifies four main aspects of that policy: 1. economic development, 2. environmental preservation, 3. cultural promotion, and 4. good governance (Mathou 2008: 5ff.; Winderl 2004: 9 f.).

The concept of GNH has "provided a coherent political basis to the regime" (Mathou 2008: 7) on which policy decisions can be based. It resembles further a modern adaptation of Buddhist tradition, as it is "inspired by traditional principles of conciliation, pragmatism, and compassion" (Mathou 1999: 617). By and large, GNH is one main cornerstone in an effort to create a coherent national identity. With its reference to environmental protection and good governance combined with the preservation of tradition and socio-economic development GNH provides an interesting modernization concept that can address the problems of changing societies in a globalized world far more adequately than prevailing concepts (Thinley 2001). For Bhutan, GNH is the formulation of the monarchy's commitment and efforts to gradually change the society, economy, and polity, without risking disruptive effects on the inner peace and stability of its people (Dessallien 2005: 46ff.).

*The Last Critical Juncture: Escalation of the Conflict with the Bhutanese People of Nepali Origin*

To begin with, it is probably quite useful to point out what this section is not trying to do. The aim is not to present a comparative ethnographic study of the different ethnic groups residing in Bhutan. It is also not in the scope of this section to provide for an encompassing analysis of the whole conflict. This has been done at length by other, far more competent scholars.<sup>14</sup> It also appears to be of limited use to reiterate the often heavily biased facts and counter-facts brought forward by both sides of the conflict. Instead this section will be limited to the government's policies regarding the people of Nepalese origin and the way in which they relate to the creation of a critical juncture.

Despite competing claims, it is safe to assert that the first influx of immigrants from Nepal to Bhutan dates back only the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are no records of Nepalese settlements in Bhutan before that time (Thinley 1994: 45; White 1909: 291). For the next decades, the southern districts of Bhutan were largely under the control of the Dorji family and the crown did not take much interest in the region. That changed with the third king coming to power. Inspired by the events in India and the formation of the Nepali Congress Party, some of the Nepalese settlers in southern Bhutan founded the Bhutan State Congress in 1952. Their most prominent demands included land reform, liberalization of the political system, and closer ties with India. However, although the party organized demonstrations and protests, it was not able to attract any significant interest or support amongst the Nepali population in Bhutan (Evans 2010: 28)<sup>15</sup>. Some claim that the modernization process initiated by the third *Druk Gyalpo* was a direct result of these agitations (Joseph 1999: 135), but given the limited scope and impact of the organization this view can be contested.

During the following decades the Bhutanese people of Nepali origin benefitted greatly from the process of modernization in the country. They became well integrated into the administrative system, holding senior government positions, and being enlisted into the Bhutanese army and police force (Evans 2010: 28), they were represented in the National Assembly and the Royal Advisory Council. The integration efforts continued under the rule of the fourth king, major Hindu festivals were declared national holidays, and five Sanskrit Pathshalas were created. In 1958 the Nationality Law of Bhutan was introduced granting citizenship to the immigrants from Nepal. It was the first codified law dealing with the status of citizens at all and was, compared to the citizenship and immigration laws of other countries, benignant at best.<sup>16</sup>

Especially during the 1960s and 70s large numbers of immigrants from Nepal poured into Bhutan. Attracted by free education, free health care, highly subsidized

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<sup>14</sup> See for example: Dhakal, D. N. S. and Christopher Strawn (1994), *Bhutan : A Movement in Exile* (Jaipur: Nirala Publications); Hutt, Michael J. (ed.), *Bhutan : Perspectives on Conflict and Dissent* (Gartmore, Stirlingshire: Kiscadale, 1994); Joseph, Mathew C. (1999), *Ethnic Conflict in Bhutan* (New Delhi: Nirala Publications).

<sup>15</sup> That failure to attract support might have been helped by the fact that the BSC was founded in Assam and operated from India. In the mid-1950s the Indian government ordered the BSC to stop using its territory for its operations, whereupon the party's headquarter was shifted to Siliguri, where the party broke up in 1969.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Royal Government of Bhutan (1958), 'The Nationality Law of Bhutan, 1958', *Ministry of Home Affairs* (Thimphu). Available at [http://www.oag.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Nationality-law-of-Bhutan-1958\\_English.pdf](http://www.oag.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Nationality-law-of-Bhutan-1958_English.pdf). (as of 01.04.2011)



agricultural inputs, and generous rural credit schemes, life in Bhutan promised to have much less hardship in store than it did in Nepal.<sup>17</sup> Naturally, micro states like Bhutan can only absorb a limited number of immigrants before this threatens to undermine the inner stability and harmony of society. What actually turned the attitude of the Bhutanese government towards the people of Nepali origin were the events that occurred all around its borders from the mid-1970s onwards. After decades of Nepalese immigration into Sikkim, the native population found itself in the minority and when tensions erupted its centuries' old Buddhist monarchy was doomed. In 1975, on the request of the Sikkimese Prime Minister to change the country's status regarding India, the Indian army moved into the capital of Gangtok. Shortly thereafter Sikkim became the 22<sup>nd</sup> state of the Indian Union. Meanwhile in West Bengal an assertive and violent Gorkhaland movement demanded its own state for the Nepalese population. These upheavals were primarily initiated by sections of the immigrant Nepalese population together with an emerging fear of a 'Greater Nepal', and led the government of Bhutan to turn its soft integration policy into an assertive homogenization policy (Evans 2010: 30; Joseph 2004: 71; Sinha 2001: 222f.). The first reaction was the revision of the 1958 Nationality Law first in 1977 and then again in 1985. Additional provisions were introduced including under what circumstances citizenship may be denied, together with tighter requirements for non-nationals to obtain Bhutanese citizenship.<sup>18</sup> These measures were accompanied by an assertive 'one people, one nation' policy and the implementation of *Driglam Namzha*, i.e. traditional values and etiquette, which aimed at bringing the *Lhotshampas*<sup>19</sup> into the Bhutanese mainstream. It is noteworthy that the king himself consulted the Lhotshampa population in public meetings to discuss the introduction of these measures without facing any open opposition to it (Sinha 2001: 227f.).

Finally, in 1988 a census was conducted to identify illegal immigrants and evict them from Bhutan. The result was that large numbers of Nepalese were found to be residing unlawfully in the country. This outcome sparked the violent conflict that led to the flight and eviction of approximately 100,000 people from Bhutan between 1989 and 1992 (Singh 2010: 87ff.).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Cf. amongst others: Joseph, Mathew C. (2004), 'National Identity in a Multi-Ethnic Context: The Experience of Bhutan', in B. C. Upreti (ed.), *Bhutan, Dilemma of Change in a Himalayan Kingdom* (New Delhi: Kalunga Publications), 74. and Kharat, Rajesh S. (2004), 'Stateless World of Bhutanese Refugees', in Bc Upreti (ed.), *Bhutan, Dilemma of Change in a Himalayan Kingdom* (New Delhi: Kalunga Publications), 80. and Thinley, Jigme Y. (1994), 'Bhutan: A Kingdom Besieged', in Michael J. Hutt (ed.), *Bhutan: Perspectives on Conflict and Dissent* (Gartmore, Stirlingshire: Kiscadale), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Please refer to Royal Government of Bhutan (1977), 'The Citizenship Act of Bhutan, 1977', *Ministry of Home Affairs* (Thimphu). Available at <http://www.oag.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Bhutan-Citizenship-Act-1977-English.pdf>; Royal Government of Bhutan (1985), 'The Citizenship Act of Bhutan, 1985', *Ministry of Home Affairs* (Thimphu). Available at <http://www.oag.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Bhutan-Citizenship-Act-1985-English.pdf>. (accessed on 01.04.2011)

<sup>19</sup> The term Lhotshampa was introduced in the 1980s in an effort to find a Bhutanese nomenclature for the Nepali settlers in the south, which until then had gone by various denotations. In its translation it simply means 'Southerners' and refers to the area in which the immigrants settled and is not a term describing a coherent ethnic group, a common mistake in the literature on this issue. The Nepalese immigrants themselves consist of many different ethnic and caste groups.

<sup>20</sup> I will not go into the dispute about how many of them were evicted and how many left voluntarily or involuntarily. It is also completely unclear to what degree Bhutanese security forces abused people, or whether these violent incidents were organized by the government. Sinha (2001), 228. Suggests that the state was not responsible, which has been rejected by authors such as Michael Hutt or Mathew Joseph. Lastly the question should be whether this conflict was superficially boiled up, given the rather small number of refugees and a Bhutanese state

At this critical juncture, the Bhutanese state was once again confronted with an existential threat. This time however, the threat was multidimensional and related not only to Bhutan's survival as an independent state, but also to the very essence of Bhutanese tradition and culture (Thinley 1994: 63). A fateful choice was made to engage in nation-state-policies instead of state-nation-policies (Linz et al. 2010) that would have been able to accommodate the distinct difference of the Nepalese culture within Bhutan. This time there was no external actor that was able to help and support the decision makers in Bhutan. On the one hand India had to face its own instabilities and crisis, and on the other there existed some apprehension against India after the integration of Sikkim. Therefore this critical juncture did not and could not lead to institutional innovation, as this would have meant that changes in the political system would not have evolved out of the *Drukpa* culture, but would actually have moved the state away from its traditional basis. Instead a policy of integration that was certainly meant well from the beginning was not revised but intensified in an attempt to create a homogenous societal base, in which all parts of the population could identify with the carrying principles of the nation.

*After the Storm: Proceed as Planned*

It speaks for itself that even within a national crisis the king remained committed to his vision of development. In 1991 the second stage of decentralization was introduced throughout the whole country. In the following years life resumed as normal, minus any further clashes with the remaining Nepalese population. Time and again India prevented refugees and their political organizations from their attempts to cross the border from Nepal into India in order to stage protests in Bhutan.

Suddenly, amidst a peaceful situation in which the country was not threatened or otherwise compelled to react to pressures or demands (which in fact did not exist at all), momentous changes once again found their way into the political system: 10<sup>th</sup> July 1998 "will probably remain a milestone date in modern Bhutanese history" (Mathou 1999: 613). By *kasho*, a royal edict, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck devolved his executive powers, stepping down as head of government, and reintroduced the principle of his own responsibility *vis-à-vis* parliament, which he had abolished back in 1972. The Council of Ministers had to step down, as new regulations foresaw the direct election of ministers by the representatives of the National Assembly. Also the triennial vote of confidence in the king was reintroduced in order to legitimize the king's rule and the National Assembly could initiate a vote of no-confidence in the king at any time by a one-third majority, upon which he would have had to step down in favor of the crown prince or the next in the line of succession. It seems that the *Druk Gyalpo* had planned these rather radical changes for a long time. After setting up an efficient system of administration in combination with grass-root democracy by decentralization, after creating a coherent national ideology and political concept, and after securing and fostering a national identity, he surprised the nation and especially the political and bureaucratic elites. Although he was explicitly asked not to give up to his executive powers, he rejected these proposals, showing once again his commitment to genuine reform and political modernization.

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that had no records of such behavior. In this regard the question of whether the UNHCR played an unfortunate role should also be discussed. The former head of the UNHCR's regional bureau for Asia, Alexander Casella, raises severe accusations against the UNHCR. For further details refer to Casella, Alexander (2009), 'Nepal finally waves away refugees', *AsiaTimes Online Edition*, 15 December 2009, available at <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/KL15Ad03.html>. (accessed on 01.04.2011)

The Year 1998 is only the starting point of radical and tremendous changes in the political landscape of the kingdom. Having followed his predecessors' path of modernization and development in the same committed, passionate, and careful manner for over two decades, he went on to kick-start a revolutionary process of true democratic transition.

The reforms that followed the royal move in 1998 were all aimed at bringing the administration and bureaucracy in accordance with democratic norms, providing for liberalization, and finally leading to the drafting of the first written constitution in Bhutanese history.

In 1999 television and the Internet were introduced, modern sources of information that were previously prohibited. Together with the Bhutan Information Communications and Media Act of 2006,<sup>21</sup> the possibilities for the public to receive independent information had considerably improved. After passing the Act in the National Assembly, two new independent broadcasting corporations and two new newspapers were established, challenging the preeminence of *Kuensel*, the state-run daily newspaper.

In 2002 the first elections under universal suffrage were conducted on sub-national level. Although the turnout was not very high, it was a first test to make the public familiar with universal adult franchise<sup>22</sup> and the procedures linked with democratic elections (Ura 2004). Two important acts were aimed at promoting democratic norms within the administrative system. The Anti-Corruption Act established an independent Anti-Corruption Commission in order to persuade cases of corruption and to build confidence in the public administration. With regard to a truly independent judiciary, the Judicial Service Act provided for the establishment of the Judicial Service Council, which is now responsible for the allocation of positions and promotions within the judicial branch.

In March 2005 the first draft of the new constitution was officially presented, after three years of work. The king commanded the drafting of the country's first constitution in 2001 and for this purpose a group of experts was set up. The group consisted of the Chief Justice of Bhutan, senior civil servants of important government agencies, members of the National Assembly, the elected members of the Royal Advisory Council, lawyers, elected members from all the 20 districts of Bhutan, and two eminent persons from the Central Monastic Body. In the three years of its work, the commission examined and analyzed dozens of constitutions from all over the world, as well as traditional sources of law from Bhutan and the region. This process was unique in several ways: first, besides the fundamental laws which were enacted in 1959, no previous document of such significance existed so that the constitution, to a large extent, could be drawn up from scratch. Unlike many other countries where judicial legacies in the form of prior constitutions exist and have to be taken into consideration, for practical or other reasons, in the Bhutanese case the drafting committee had an enormous amount of freedom in designing the new constitution. A second important aspect was the fact that the drafting process was completely free from politico-strategic considerations and the usual bargaining of the involved political actors. As the constitution was drafted before a noteworthy

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<sup>21</sup> Royal Government of Bhutan (2006), 'Bhutan Information, Communications and Media Act, 2006', *Ministry of Information And Communications* (Thimphu). Available at [http://www.oag.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Bhutan-Information-Communications-and-Media-Act-2006\\_English.pdf](http://www.oag.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/Bhutan-Information-Communications-and-Media-Act-2006_English.pdf). (accessed on 01.04.2011)

<sup>22</sup> Note that the voting age was set to 21. However that qualifies as universal suffrage.

politicization of the population and the elites took place, the considerations of the commission could be limited to purely technical aspects within the broad framework that the king had set for the content of the shape of the constitution.<sup>23</sup> Finally, the drafting of the constitution was not the result of demands from the people for reform. It did not have to consider balancing necessary structural-constitutional reform versus 'national agitation' (Rothermund 1962: 21).

After the first draft was finished and presented to the public, members of the Royal Family and the king himself extensively toured the country, explaining the constitution to the people, and discussing their concerns. As a result, suggestions and concerns were taken into consideration during the final drafting.<sup>24</sup> In December the same year, the king announced that the first democratic elections on national level would be held in 2008 and, surprising and shocking his people, that he would then abdicate in favor of his son, the Crown Prince. From that moment on he was bound to his word and history as well as the world would judge him with respect to his ability to abide to his plans. In 2006 the Electoral Commission of Bhutan was inaugurated and it started to prepare for the general elections in 2008 through voter education, the promotion of political awareness and organizing the conduct of the elections. It also held two mock-elections in order to give the population a chance to familiarize itself with the procedures and the electronic voting machines. India supported the efforts of the Election Commission with knowhow and technical assistance all throughout the process.

On 14 December 2006, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the fourth *Druk Gyalpo*, surprisingly announced his immediate abdication. "It was the first time in world history that a monarch, who was initially vested with absolute powers, voluntarily reduced the scope of these powers and eventually abdicated with no other reason than his own dedication to political reforms" (Mathou 2008). His son Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, who holds a MA degree in political science from Oxford University, took over the official functions, but postponed his coronation until after the elections and the passing of the new constitution. This can also be seen as the first achievement of the new monarch. Even though this gesture is more of a symbolic character, it nevertheless shows the changing self-perception of the Bhutanese monarchy. It also demonstrated that the new king had the same commitment to democracy as his father had. A second important achievement of the new king was the revision and renegotiation of the friendship treaty with India. In February 2007 a new friendship treaty was signed, basically resembling the old one from 1949 with the exception that Bhutan now gained absolute sovereignty over its own foreign policy.

In June 2007 the ban on political parties was lifted to allow for their formation in the face of the upcoming elections. No parties on the basis of race, religion or ethnicity were allowed, but only three parties registered of which one was rejected with regard to the restrictions mentioned. In December 2007 the very first democratic elections to the newly established upper chamber of parliament took place, though on a non-partisan basis. The turnout was 53.14% and in several

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<sup>23</sup> The reasons for and the purpose of drafting the constitution have been remarkably well articulated by the King himself. For details refer to the King's address to the Constitution Drafting Committee: <http://www.constitution.bt/html/making/speeches/speech00.htm> (accessed on 01.04.2011).

<sup>24</sup> For some of the changes incorporated after public consultation refer to Penjore, Ugyen (2007), 'Draft constitution: final version ready', *Kuensel Online Edition*, 04 August 2007, available at <http://www.kuenselonline.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=8848>. (accessed on 01.04.2011)

districts elections had to be postponed as there were no candidates. But initial fears that democracy might be rejected outright by many Bhutanese did not come true. The National Assembly elections were finally held on 24 March 2008 and contested by two parties: the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT). With 79.4 % the turnout was very high considering the majority based electoral system.

Table 1: National Assembly Election Results<sup>25</sup>

2008	Total Number	%	Seats	%
Registered voters	318,465	—		
Votes cast	253,012	79.4		
Invalid votes	0	0.0		
Valid votes	253,012	100.0		
			47	100.0
DPT	169,490	67.0	45	95.7
PDP	83,522	33.0	2	4.3

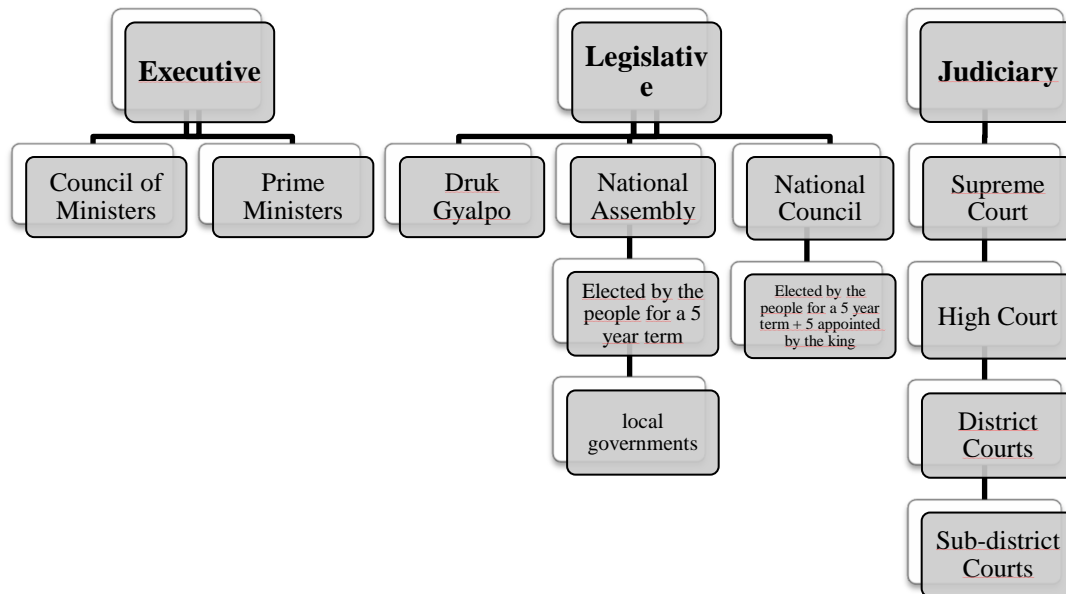
With the first democratic elections, a decisive step had been taken on the country's path of transition. Even though the election result and the preceding campaign suggests that multi-party competition is a concept that still needs to be learned and internalized by the people and also the politicians, the elections were truly democratic and conducted in accordance to all international standards.<sup>26</sup> One should not misjudge the incredible landslide victory for the DPT as being the result of an undemocratic process, but instead acknowledge and realize the distorting effect of the electoral system.

The last formal step on Bhutan's transition path was the passing and signing of the country's first written constitution on 18 July 2008. One year after the monarchy's centennial birthday, Bhutan had been transformed into a constitutional monarchy providing for democratic standards *de jure* and constantly pursuing these standards *de facto*. On 6 November 2008 Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck received the Raven Crown from the hands of his father and officially became the fifth *Druk Gyalpo* of Bhutan. Thereby one of the most important and formative periods in Bhutanese history had come to an end and another one had just yet begun.

<sup>25</sup> The results have been compiled from official documents of the Election Commission of Bhutan ([www.election-bhutan.org.bt](http://www.election-bhutan.org.bt)).

<sup>26</sup> Refer to European Union Election Observation Mission (2008), 'Bhutan - Final Report - National Assembly Elections, 24 March 2008', *European External Action Service* Available at [http://eeas.europa.eu/human\\_rights/election\\_observation/bhutan/final\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/human_rights/election_observation/bhutan/final_report_en.pdf) (accessed on 01.04.2011)

Figure 3: Structure of the Political System of Bhutan as stipulated by the Constitution<sup>27</sup>



## CONCLUSIONS

The preceding pages have shown the institutional developments, paired with key changes in other important dimensions of the Bhutanese state since it came into being as a unified entity in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. From the establishment of a Buddhist theocracy under the first *Shabdrung* Ngawang Namgyal, through the unsettling period of rivalry, factionalism, and civil war that succeeded his death, to the reestablishing of order and centralized authority under the first *Druk Gyalpo* Ugyen Wangchuck. These times were followed by almost half a century of self-imposed isolation in which the new monarchy slowly and carefully monopolized its authority and introduced tentative changes and innovations. Little was known and little was heard from Bhutan until the balance and stability in its neighborhood were turned upside down in the process of decolonialization to the south and revolution to the north. As a result Bhutan embarked on a path of modernization in the political and economic sphere. The country learned from its own difficulties and from the mistakes of others, and steadily adapted its overall development policies according to its needs. When peace and stability were at stake once again, the government pushed its integration policy over the edge, closing the way to an institutional solution to the problem. The results have been discussed, here and elsewhere, and the tragedy they pose for both sides of the conflict continue to loom over Bhutan. Apparently unimpressed by the crisis however, the king continued to follow his plan and strategy of development and change. Eventually, step by step over a period of ten years, he introduced reform after reform and unflinchingly guided his country through the transition. Only when he was sure that the result he wished for would emerge, he gave up his power and his throne, making way for a new generation of Bhutanese who would for the first time grow up in and enjoy the merits of true democracy.

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has not been without challenges for Bhutan,<sup>28</sup> but the fact that the Royal Government and the monarchy guided this small country

<sup>27</sup> Source: the author's own design

<sup>28</sup> The still unresolved border dispute with China as well as the threat from Indian and other militant groups disrupting the peace in Bhutan come to mind. For further details on these

successfully through these problems underlines again the remarkable capability of Bhutan to adapt and to remain capable of acting. Democracy has to be learned, even more so when no prior experience with it can help to overcome problems or to resolve disputes (Gallenkamp 2009). The process of getting familiar with democratic politics is still under way. The people, politicians, and the media have to discover how to interact with each other. Furthermore, things in a democracy do not always go smooth. It is precisely the way in which disagreements are managed and resolved, how unmet expectations and promises are handled, which distinguishes democratic politics from others.

It has been convincingly shown that critical junctures, i.e. decisive periods in history that hold the potential for or require substantial institutional changes, have opened in Bhutanese history when the nation's unity and sovereignty were threatened. While the first two junctures identified resulted in the introduction of new institutions or a general realignment in politics, the third critical juncture did not have this effect. One possible explanation that has been provided was the fact that in the first two cases 'great men of vision' were able to find common ground, to exchange ideas and to get the moral and technical support of an external actor. Between 1904 and 1907 the friendship between Ugyen Wangchuck and Jean Claude White constituted the foundation for the creation of hereditary monarchy, while between 1952 and 1964 the bond and cordial relationship between Pandit Nehru and Jigme Dorji Wangchuck enabled modernization of unprecedented scope. However, vision alone is not enough to produce changes, it also has to be met with commitment and the ability to act. At both critical junctures the exceptional personalities of the actors involved facilitated change. On the other hand, the third critical juncture, roughly between 1975 and 1988, did not result in institutional changes or the realignment of politics. Instead, the policies that were already in place were strengthened and finally pushed too far. The difference between the first two and the third case can in part be explained by the missing link with an external actor. But given the enormous legacy of Jigme Singye Wangchuck, another possibility comes to mind: His vision was not compatible with the necessity of major institutional changes at the time the critical juncture occurred. So the king opted to stay on the path already chosen and constantly intensified the integration policies, hoping to solve the conflict by these means and to move on with the development he had planned. Finally, when substantial institutional change did occur during Bhutan's transition to democracy between 1998 and 2008, there appears to be no critical juncture at all, which would have facilitated or caused the reforms that were introduced. Again, the vision and probably foresight of the fourth Dragon King account for the introduction of a new institutional system, which in turn will strengthen the resilience, security, and sovereignty of the Bhutanese state in the future.

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issues please refer to Gallenkamp, Marian (2010a), *Between China, India and the Refugees: Understanding Bhutan's National Security Scenario*, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS Issue Brief No. 154), available at [http://www.ipcs.org/pdf\\_file/issue/IB154-Marian-Bhutan.pdf](http://www.ipcs.org/pdf_file/issue/IB154-Marian-Bhutan.pdf). (accessed on 01.04.2011)

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