

Bhutan's Velvet Revolution in Reverse

The last Buddhist monarchy, the breathtakingly beautiful Himalayan nation of Bhutan, is preparing to become a parliamentary democracy, with elections slated for early 2008. King Jigme Singye Wangchuck has been readying the country for almost two decades by decentralizing the government, handing over his powers to his ministers and creating a constitution, but the Bhutanese still can't quite believe it.

*Story by Linda Leaming
Photos by John Berthold*

In the peaceful Buddhist Kingdom of Bhutan a revolution is taking place. But you'd never know it by looking at the streets of Thimphu. True, the Swimming Pool Road is being widened, Changlemethang Sports Ground is getting a facelift, construction of the ring-road to Babesa limps along, and from my sitting room window in Motithang, I can see no fewer than ten construction sites, including the fabulous new boutique hotel near the town's center, built in partnership by the Indian Taj Group and local business people.

There is a ban on any new construction, and citizens are urged to finish what they've started in time for the centenary anniversary¹ of the monarchy and the coronation of King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the Fifth Druk Gyalpo, next year in late spring.

June 2008 is also the official switch from Buddhist monarchy to parliamentary democracy, with elections for 105 seats in the legislature. The Bhutanese have a lot of work to do, not the least of which is to educate the 650,000-plus populace on the nuances of democracy and one-person, one-vote.

"Most of the people would prefer the monarchy. Now that the king has given power to the people they feel a bit lost. They have some apprehension early on, but this will change," said Rinzin Namgay, a People's Democratic Party candidate contesting a seat in the parliament in 2008.

So it's not a struggle for independence so much as it is a struggle to get ready for it. The struggle mostly plays out in the minds of the Bhutanese, not on the streets, and the coercion is from the top down. Much to the dismay of the

Bhutanese, their revered former King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck – who governed Bhutan for 32 years, since he was 17, and whose development program eschews GNP for GNH (Gross National Happiness) – abdicated last December in favor of his son, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. He commanded parliamentary elections be held in 2008, the centennial of the monarchy, and that his country become a democracy. He is forcing his people's hand to accept self-rule.

It took some time for the Bhutanese to get their heads around the idea that the King would step down. Early last year there was talk in Thimphu of trying to convince him to stay on.

But things are proceeding apace, and two rounds of mock elections took place last spring to teach the Bhutanese about the electoral process. Over half of the 225,000 registered voters showed up to pick their favorite colors: blue to fight corruption, green for environmentally-friendly development, red for industrialization, and yellow for promotion and preservation of the culture. Yellow won both elections – 44 percent in the first round.

The king is to be commended for his selflessness and lack of ego. He is making history, too. In recorded history, a monarch has never abdicated to make way for a new government.

So far the transition from absolute monarchy to parliamentary democracy is proceeding smoothly. The former king saw democracy as inevitable; why wait until revolution forces his hand, as in neighboring Nepal? His strategy was to adapt and change while he was still strong and able to help with the transition.

In the streets of Thimphu, in the villages, in offices and shops throughout the kingdom, politics has usurped every

¹ Bhutan's absolute monarchy dates back to 1907, when Jigme Singye's great grandfather Ugyen Wangchuk was formally anointed the first king of Bhutan with British support and patronage.



The fantastically situated 21,300 foot peak of Khang-bum Mountain rises gracefully behind Gasa Dzong built in 1646. An old legend relates that Gomo, a protective serpent, rose from a small pond near the dzong to defeat an army of invading Tibetans.

A group of women and children from Merak wait by the side of the road near Wamrong in eastern Bhutan.

Pema, 80, and Pema, 24, enjoy a moment together while sifting bean pods in a basket. Many Bhutanese names are used by both men and women.

Women from Thanza often wear handmade wool hats to ward off the cold Himalayan chill.





A young Doya girl from Dorokha village wears her traditional white paki dress.

Two gomchens from Wangkha play trumpets during a private religious ceremony. Bhutanese regularly request local monks and gomchens to perform ceremonies in their house to invoke the protection of particular deities.

Santamon, 13, wears wet rice on his forehead after receiving a traditional Hindu Dasai blessing.

other topic of conversation. "Thimphu is all abuzz with the elections. Now all people talk about are politics," said Kezang P. Dorji, a Thimphu businesswoman. Generally speaking, everyone trusts the king, she says, and they trust that he is guiding them to the right thing.

The people of Bhutan have enjoyed unprecedented prosperity; their lives are better than their parents, and they want to keep it that way, so they have an advantage in this move to democracy. It's not happening as a result of any war or coup; the government is stable, so the Bhutanese can focus on educating the populace and on electing leaders who will continue to move them forward.

There are obvious difficulties. Geographically, Bhutan's isolated valleys tucked away in the high mountains will make educating the people about the shift to democracy difficult. About half the population is illiterate so everyone must be educated about the democratic process. Roads and electricity are difficult and expensive to bring to remote valleys and mountainsides.

"We tell the people that His Majesty has given the power to them, so they should elect the right candidates. Don't go by whims and fancies. They have to decide who will be good for the country and help the people," said Rinzin Namgay. He, along with many other volunteers and candidates, is traveling to constituencies, trying to explain the democratic process and learning about the problems the people face.

According to Mr Rinzin the problems are quite general: They need roads to transport their agricultural products, they want electricity and telephone coverage (about half of the remote villages have no electricity), and they want more and better schools.

Thimphu's population is fast approaching 100,000. That means about one in six Bhutanese live in the capital. A nationwide census last year, Bhutan's first, revealed that 44 percent of the Bhutanese were farmers, which

was a surprise. Until the census, the belief was that about 80 percent of the population still worked the farms. The flight to towns such as Thimphu and Phuentsholing on the Indian border has accelerated.

Even so, any Bhutanese would tell you that he or she has a pretty good life. There is free healthcare and free education in Bhutan – and they take up something like 20 percent of the budget. Gross National Happiness, as a development process, emphasizes equitable economic development along with cultural enrichment, ecological preservation and good governance. The trick will be for the country to maintain and improve their governance with the shift.

In Thimphu, Kezang P. Dorji has concerns: "The general public, especially the illiterate and undereducated, are certainly leaving it to karma and a strong belief in doing the right thing. Some of us are still uncertain that Bhutan is ready. Democracy has been a gift to us from the throne, but our people were happiest while we were still fully governed by our king. Today, for those of us who understand a little bit of politics, it is a cause for worry. We worry that this gracious gift might be exploited by a handful to ensure that they put in place a government that upholds their interests."

In an interview with the Indian News Service (IANS) in May, the chief election commissioner Dasho Kuenzang Wangdi, (whose salt and pepper hair is exhibiting more salt of late) said Bhutan was "ready for a change" and believes the vision of democracy envisaged by the former king would be good for the nation.

"The people are being well prepared for democracy and there are reasons to be optimistic," he says.

"We are tough mountain people," adds Thimphu businesswoman Dago Beda, "and we have excellent leaders and more important, we have our rich culture and strong tradition to see us through."

What will serve the Bhutanese more than any of their considerable attributes is their

faith. They believe in their king and so follow his command to bring democracy, but they are also an introspective, self-examining people. They are concerned and want to do the right thing. They know they have a lot to lose if they don't.

His Excellency Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley is Home Minister of the Royal Government of Bhutan, former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, one of the architects of the new constitution, and a probable candidate for Prime Minister in 2008. With a long career in public service, including a stint as Bhutan's UN ambassador in New York, he is an honest, dedicated, and enlightened leader. Does he have a future in the new democracy? Most people think so.

"We're a Buddhist society. Politics will have to find direction from this basis. Even more than Buddhism, we are a spiritual people," he says. "Ours is a country that has a development paradigm of GNH (Gross National Happiness) and GNH is largely culture driven, and our spirituality will be a factor in the new democracy. We are concerned with human values, social systems and equitable development. I don't see this changing with a new form of government. Family values will have a big place in our new democracy."

Added to this, the Bhutanese see themselves less as individuals and more as members of a community, family or country. This interconnectedness gives rise to a security and comfort with themselves and their place in society. They know who they are. They are pieces of a larger whole, a very Buddhist attitude. They know very well that the political game is played by Western rules, but what they believe won't change. Their community and their sense of culture are intact.

The general elections in February 2008 are shaping up to have two political parties vying for positions in the government but some things do not change. The newly formulated constitution will ensure that a sound development policy continues into the future and next

year will usher in the tenth Five Year Plan, a program of development begun by the Third King in 1959. The emphasis will be on poverty alleviation.

"Whatever the outcome of next year's elections, Bhutanese politics will have to be inclusive and address poverty," says Lyonpo Jigmi. "The trick is to make it all work as we keep coming up against newer challenges."

Nowhere is democracy smooth as silk. It is, by nature, messy and complex, and each country must adapt, keeping in mind its own development stage and values and beliefs.

Bhutan's prime minister Khandu Wangchuk and six members of his Cabinet have already resigned to pave the way for the transition to democracy. The seven officials submitted their resignations to King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck at the end of July.

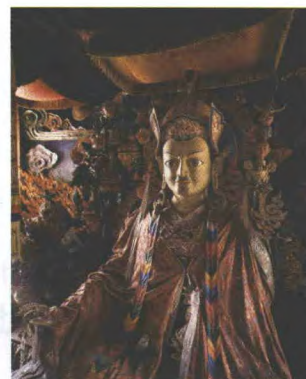
"The biggest challenge in the transition is in the paradigm shift every Bhutanese has to make in the way we view participation in our emerging democracy," says Thimphu resident Thinley Dorji.

"If each of us sits back and leaves it all to the parties and politicians, we will not have fulfilled our responsibilities of being citizens in a democracy. We should all remember that with rights comes responsibility. So we must vote [and] we must be prepared to continually get involved through every means at our disposal, especially through the media and civil society; the growth of both must be nurtured as a matter of highest priority if we are serious about quality democracy."

Change is inherent in all things. Uncertainty, contingency and karma rule our behaviors. Does any of this sound familiar? ☸

Linda Leaming is an American who lives in Thimphu, Bhutan, with her Bhutanese thangka painter husband. Her story, "A Lesson from a Lama: Breathing Meditation" appeared in Mandala October/November 2006.

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From Top:

Padmasambhava statue, Ura Lhakhang

Gomchen Wangdi, 71, is well known around Punakha village for his boisterous and charismatic personality. As with many Bhutanese, his teeth are darkly stained from chewing betel nut.

Two monks and a dignitary help roll up the large thongdrel from Dagana Dzong featuring Buddha Shakyamuni in the center. Thongdrels provide protection from bad rebirths to all the villagers and attendees who have come to view it.