

Bhutan's peculiar road to democracy



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Until recently Bhutan did not fit into the story of the global triumph of democracy. Not only the way democratisation was pursued, but also the manner in which it was interpreted made this process exceptional. As a landlocked country, sandwiched between China and India, it was a late starter in the endeavour of state-building. Nevertheless, it seems that the last, reclusive Himalayan kingdom started a silent but constant metamorphosis from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional one by introducing democratic elements. Initiated by the king rather than a revolutionary movement or a national catastrophe, this radical step was unusual: a voluntary reallocation of power by the king in the face of a remarkable indifference towards democracy by the people. A great political leap with rising concerns and hopes not only among the ruling dynasty but surprisingly also among the common Bhutanese. Having this in mind political observers tend either to recognise this as an idiosyncratic Bhutanese style of achieving democracy or to condemn it as a cunning strategy of the ruling dynasty to stay in power. Consequently the antagonists proclaim that the king's reforms did not originate from a transformation from an authoritarian monarchical rule towards real parliamentary democracy.

However one might choose to read these tides of change, this phenomenon was initiated by the establishment of a National Assembly (Tshogdu Chenmo) by the then king

(Druk Gyalpo) Jigme Dorji Wangchuk in 1953. This step was followed by several other democratic undertakings in the next years by the king and his royal successors.

For example the introductions of a no-confidence vote enabling the 'parliament' to

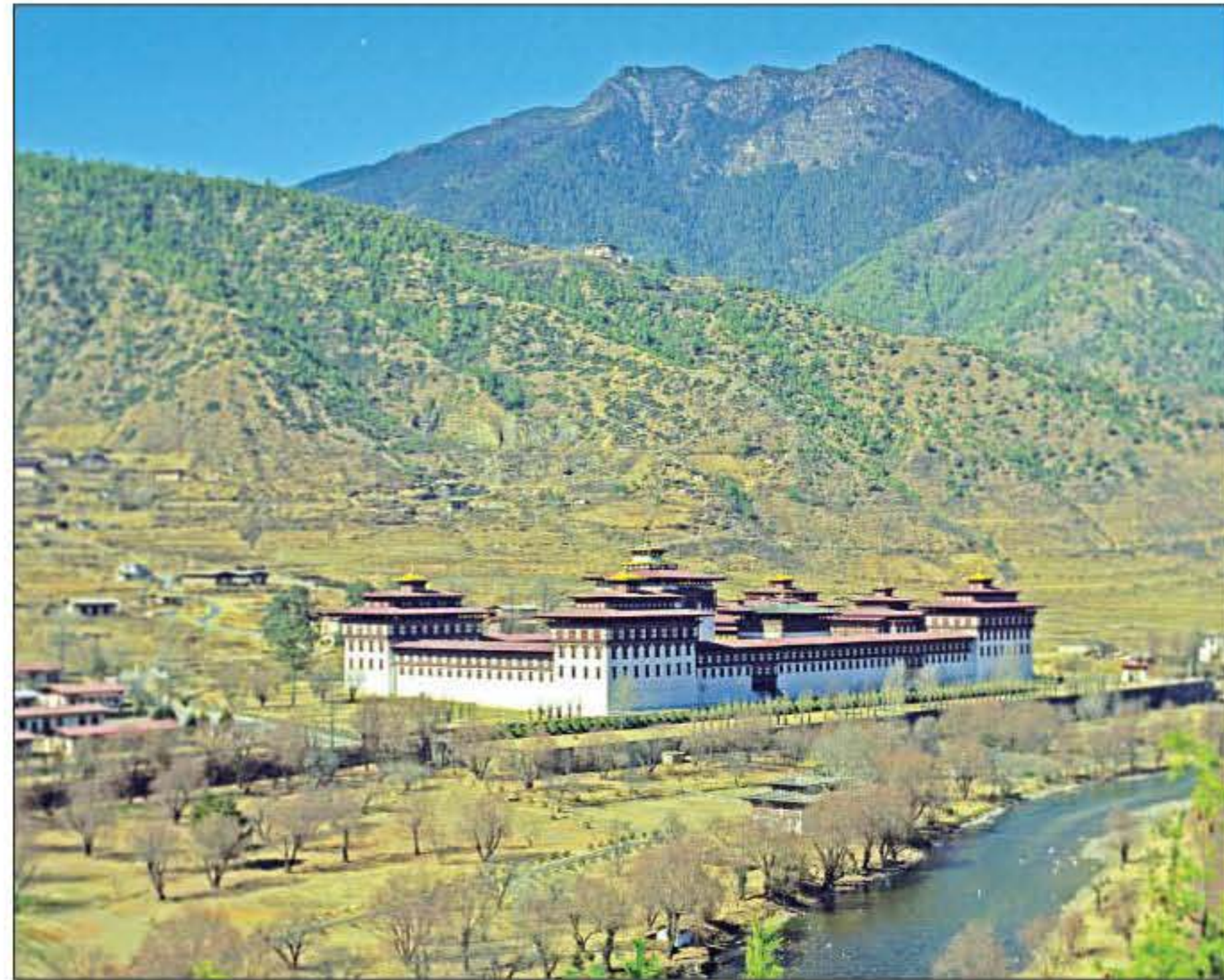
the organisation of the judiciary as well as its separation from the executive and legislative by establishing a High Court (Thrimkhang Gongma). Moving towards a democratic constitutional monarchy, on 18 July 2008, the first constitution was signed which formally

upper house of the newly created bicameral parliament).

Despite of these promising developments, critics of this process did not remain silent. A major reason for this discomfort is most likely due to the fact that the political transition was overshadowed by a

several distinct communities regarding ethnicity, social structure, beliefs, language, but is also host to so called indigenous peoples as well as immigrants. The traumatic peak of this national collective identity construction was the forced ousting of people of Nepalese origin. The fact that many of these people identified themselves as the spearhead of Bhutan's democratic movement is picked up by some analysts to prove that the king shows a lack of democratic conviction and commitment. However, in order to be able to assess the quality of democracy and the prospect of its consolidation in Bhutan one should shed some light on following aspects.

First, besides several democratic achievements, one has to state that the king is without question the major stakeholder in the political landscape of Bhutan. He still possesses significant formal veto powers in the decision-making process especially regarding the nomination of most of the leading posts of all three branches of Bhutan's political system. Therefore, there is no doubt that policy formulation and implementation will remain under the monarch's control. Furthermore, he remains the supreme commander of the Royal Bhutanese Army (RBA) with significant influence on its top echelon. Due to the fact that there is no parliamentary oversight over the military, the king still owns the monopoly over the country's most significant coercive force.



View of Tashichoedzong, Thimphu, seat of the Bhutanese government since 1952

remove the king, a Royal Advisory Council (Lodoi Tshogde), and a Council of Ministers (Lhengye Zhungtshog). In order to establish a notion of checks-and-balances within the political system he significantly reshaped

marked the end of an absolute royal rule. Subsequently a multi-party democracy was established leading to the first parliamentary elections in the same year followed by Local Government Elections and National Council Elections (the

restrictive cultural policy (Driglam Namzha) which was branded as the 'Bhutanisation' of people of foreign descent. This is particularly gaining momentum since the society of the country is multi-ethnic being not only composed of

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Second, besides the formal prerogatives, the socio-political culture and the royal legacy in Bhutan has generated and still is generating a tremendous mechanism of informal influence for the king. Various observers are stating that the people are expecting the king to continue with his efforts in navigating the country through the challenging straits of modernization, especially to help avoiding the negative side-effects of opening up. Having this in mind, this form of 'democratic skepticism' creates a significant resource for the king to maintain his role as the major agent, owning the last say in decisions regarding the promotion of change or in contrast maintaining the status quo. Viewing himself as the guarantor of Bhutan's development and the people's well-being, makes it very unlikely that today or in the near future the monarch will perform only symbolic functions.

Third, the political culture in the country can (still) be described as a balance between traditional deference and general consensus. The major challenge for the royal government in the context of promoting and introducing democracy is how to stimulate public popular participation and political awareness without creating systemic instability. Taking into account the political turmoil in countries which have to face the twofold challenge of democratization and socio-economic development, it seems that the chosen processes of gradual introduction of political reforms match the particular needs of the country and its people, at least for the majority. With view

on the current democratic set back and the political, violent turmoil in the Maldives, it seems that there is no universal strategy for democratic transition. In this context, one can state that the conservative, non-confrontational and apolitical attitude of the majority of the Bhutanese people as well as the notion of consensus in decision-making created a promising environment and no serious hindrances for change up until now. However, Bhutan's political elite also has to internalize and respect that political competition and contestation are necessary parts of democratic processes.

Finally, the fact that democracy in Bhutan is often described as a 'gift' from the monarch 'from above' makes the political transformation in Bhutan peculiar but not apriori condemnable. The question of who has sown the seeds of democracy - the king or an anti-royal movement - is misleading.

The major challenge today is how to make such a top-down model work and how to achieve a shift towards sustainable democracy. Therefore, one can state that terms such as 'totalitarian' or 'authoritarian regime' used to describe the current political system do not match reality. Ultimately, democracy in Bhutan still remains in its infancy but it is not a 'truncated' one.

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