

## **Bhutanese reform, Nepalese criticism**

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The introduction of democracy in the small Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan is a positive political development. Nepalese critics should give it fair consideration, says Karma Phuntsho.

An outsider to the Himalayan region might expect the kingdoms of Nepal and Bhutan to be akin, neighbourly and cordial, but such images belong to the fanciful realm of Shangri-La. The two nations are rarely on good terms. Differences between Bhutan and Nepal may begin in their socio-cultural roots - primarily a Himalayan Buddhist culture in the case of Bhutan and an Indic-Hindu one for Nepal - but their seemingly divergent paths in the more recent history of modernisation and development have taken them further apart.

In the process, Nepal has generally continued to view Bhutan as a closed medieval autocracy. For most Bhutanese, ancient Nepal is a sacred site of pilgrimage, but they rarely refer to modern Nepal. When they do, it is with a mixture of pity and contempt, depicting Nepal as a nation beleaguered by wayward modernisation and endless political strife. To many Bhutanese, Nepal is an example to avoid.

### **The Nepalese perception**

Nepalese writers have exacerbated the acrimony. Their reports of Bhutan, both from within Nepal and abroad, have been mainly critical. Dharma Adhikari's openDemocracy article "Bhutan's democratic puzzle" (20 June 2006) is a case in point.

A primary target of Nepalese criticism of Bhutan has been the monarch, who is loved and revered by most of his people. Many even deify Jigme Singye Wangchuck as a *bodhisattva* king, who is born to lead the country through the turmoil of our time. Nepalese writers, by contrast, generally portray him as a narcissistic potentate whom his people fear and who persecutes his adversaries ruthlessly.

Both Bhutanese deification and Nepalese demonisation take the perception of the monarchy to harmful extremes. The truth, and a useful understanding, lies somewhere in between. King Jigme is certainly the most powerful figure in Bhutan, but he lives a simple life and keeps in close contact with his people. He is a benign monarch, put to serious test by the challenges of our age,

including western cultural invasion, the southern Bhutanese immigration and refugee problem, and the Indian rebels.

Nepalese writers also routinely paint a picture of Bhutan as a nation torn by factionalism. The ruling Ngalong (Dzongkha-speaking westerners) in Bhutan, these writers argue, hold power and continually suppress the other groups of Lhotshampas (Nepali-speaking southerners) and Sharchopas (Tsanglha-speaking easterners). There was a conflict in the late 1980s between the Nepali-speaking southerners and the non-Nepali northerners, who are loosely called Drukpas (although this term should refer to all Bhutanese). Its aftermath looms large even today.

However, among the Drukpas there never was any stark political divide between the Sharchopa and Ngalong groups. The highly diverse, variable and interwoven ethnic and linguistic composition of northern Bhutan defies such simple bifurcation. For the last two decades, almost half the ministers were from the eastern districts of Bhutan. Many prominent posts in government are occupied by easterners and they make up about half of Bhutan's population.

Nepalese writers often assume that Bhutan's royal family line belongs to the "ruling" Ngalong group that is counterposed to the Sharchopa. The Wangchuck dynasty is mainly of a stock from the central districts of Kurtoe and Bumthang, which traditionally fall under the domain of eastern Bhutan. Power has been concentrated in the hands of the central Bhutanese ever since the great-great-grandfather of the present king. Power was never solely in Ngalong hands.

Similarly, the leading Drukpa dissident, Rongthong Kuenley Dorji, is often identified as a Sharchopa, in order to fuel the fictional Ngalong-Sharchopa conflict. Rongthong Kuenley is not a Sharchopa, or a native Tsanglha speaker. He comes from Kheng, a cultural and linguistic group distinct from both Ngalong and Sharchopa.

### **The refugee issue**

One visible effect of ill-informed criticism of Bhutan is the widening rift between Bhutan and Nepal, and the subsequent stalemate that this entails for the refugees issue. Nepalese media have continually insisted that all 100,000 refugees languishing in the camps in eastern Nepal are citizens expelled from Bhutan in a campaign of "ethnic cleansing" which began in the late 1980s. They assert that Bhutan is solely responsible and should repatriate the refugees *en masse*. However, the refugee problem is far from straightforward.

The refugee crisis, the Bhutanese argue, is a consequence of demography. The Himalayan foothills region stretching from Nepal through the Darjeeling hills and Sikkim to Bhutan was populated by roaming groups, mostly ethnic Nepalese, seeking greener pastures.

When Bhutan opened its door to the outside world in the 1960s, thousands of these migrants entered Bhutan as labourers on various developments projects. Bhutan's low population density, fertile farmlands, free social services and sustained economic growth undoubtedly made the kingdom an attractive destination. For this reason, Bhutan has insisted that the refugee problem is largely a problem of illegal immigration and that Bhutan is being made the victim of its own success.

The initial number of refugees in 1991, when conflict erupted in Bhutan, was about 2,500, reaching 6,000 at the end of that year. When the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) set up camps in eastern Nepal - with poor screening and an attractive allowance - thousands of people are said to have flocked there, claiming to be refugees from Bhutan. Numbers soared to almost 100,000 by 2000. The figure given at the end of 2005 was 117,647, with almost a quarter of that number born in exile. The birthrate among refugees was twice as high as among the local Nepalese population.

In an attempt to resolve the crisis, the governments of Nepal and Bhutan had held fifteen rounds of bilateral talks by 2003, the most significant achievement of the negotiations being the formation of the Joint Verification Team. The verification of 12,183 residents of Khudunabari camp by the JVT revealed that only 293 were forcefully evicted from Bhutan, 8,595 emigrated voluntarily and 347 fled after criminal activities. The remainder (2,948, i.e., almost a quarter of the total) had no links to Bhutan. When the result was announced, the JVT team came under missile attack from the frustrated crowd, leading to the existing stalemate.

To effectively address the refugee crisis, the geopolitical situation in the region when the crisis began around 1990 must also be considered. Nepal was then exuberant and tumultuous with its new-found democracy, having stripped then King Birendra of power; Sikkim had Nar Bahadur Bhandari at its helm; and the Darjeeling hills were being turned into an autonomous Gorkhaland by Subhash Ghising. The fervour of Nepali dominion and nationalism was at its peak.

The "pro-democracy" and "human rights" movements within Bhutan, led by ethnically Nepalese individuals such as Tek Nath Rizal happened around this

time. Moreover, the demonstrations organised by his Bhutan People's Party were never just non-violent protests by patriotic citizens. Most dissidents were seen by the authorities in the capital, Thimphu, to be more loyal to the Nepalese power abroad than to Bhutan's royal government. As the demonstrations of 1990 turned violent, Thimphu considered the movement an armed rebellion seeking to overthrow the ruling regime.

In such circumstances, the threat to Bhutan of Nepalese cultural expansion and demographic takeover was as serious as it could be. Bhutan dreaded facing the same fate as the erstwhile Buddhist kingdom of Sikkim, which by then was fully controlled by Hindu Nepalese.

The demonstrations and the conflict between the protestors - later branded by Thimphu as anti-nationals and terrorists - and the Bhutanese military, resulted in many deaths, tortures and displacements, and much destruction of property. For its part, the Bhutanese government has admitted excesses by its security forces in the course of the crackdown. But it was never a simple case of "ethnic cleansing" or a state-sponsored persecution of a non-compliant minority, as media outside Bhutan generally portray the situation. It was a sordid "ethnic conflict", and even the Drukpas in the north and southern Bhutanese who were loyal to the regime had to bear the brunt of it.

For over a decade and a half now, the refugee crisis has dragged on, desperate as ever, with an increasingly restless youth population, diminishing local sympathy, donor fatigue and no solution in sight. The refugee leaders have lost direction and the community is split by seven political parties. Yet the Nepalese and international media only blame Bhutan for the delay in finding a solution. In reality, however, the negotiations and the process of verification seems to have been obstructed more by Nepal's political instability than by Bhutan's reluctance. Doubts are being cast over whether Nepal is genuinely committed to ending the crisis.

Bhutan, however apprehensive it may seem in resolving the issue, knows that a permanent solution of the refugee problem is in its best interest. Whether or not Bhutan likes it, the people in the camps go under Bhutanese names. To say the least, the refugee issue is an embarrassment for a nation which champions the cause of Gross National Happiness. Bhutan, therefore, has good reasons to find a solution - as long as it is not pushed too hard from outside.

## **Bhutan's democratisation**

The Nepalese view of Bhutan is filtered almost entirely through the refugee issue. Everything else in Bhutan is measured against it. Hence, Nepalese writers also have begun to question the process of democracy in Bhutan and the draft constitution that is in circulation. Dharma Adhikari, in his Open Democracy article, cites doubts about the king's sincerity, noting arguments that the monarch "hopes to use the constitution to circumvent a simmering upheaval and delay a truly representative democracy". He further remarks that Bhutan's democratisation at best portends a two-party oligarchy.

Needless to say, many questions can be asked about the royal intention and the eventual outcome of the current process of democratisation in Bhutan. But there is no struggle for power between the palace and the people, as Adhikari claims. His is a reiteration of ill-founded perceptions of Bhutan blurred by incidents in Nepal itself, where a despotic king clung to power up to the last minute. The situation is reversed in Bhutan. Notwithstanding the apprehension and misgivings about democracy among the majority of his people, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck stands firm on ushering in democracy by 2008.

Bhutan's political evolution from an absolute monarchy to parliamentary democracy is proving, so far, to be one of the most unique and smooth processes of democratisation in our times. The king should be given due credit for his initiatives.

The introduction of democracy will be good for Bhutan and the region, although it will not be a panacea for all of the country's problems. It will not necessarily resolve the refugee problem, but most likely will create favourable circumstances for its solution.

### **A reconciliatory approach**

The refugee crisis is primarily a humanitarian crisis, not a human-rights problem. Hence, its solution is a shared international responsibility. Bhutan, which has already made considerable concessions in the bilateral negotiations, should not be held solely responsible. A viable and perhaps the most realistic solution, as the UNHCR representative in Nepal suggests, would be repatriation to Bhutan for some and resettlement in Nepal and third countries for others.

Campaigns by refugees as well as by Nepalese have sought to force Bhutan into a settlement through international pressure. But the country, recently listed, variously, as the eighth- and thirteenth-happiest nation on earth, is

enjoying peace, stability and economic development. It is unlikely to bow to pressure or intimidation.

India, Bhutan's closest ally, has considered the refugee issue a bilateral problem between Bhutan and Nepal, and has stayed out of the dispute. If India ever were to become involved, there is no guarantee that it would propose a solution favourable to the refugees. And involvement by a regional power in sub-regional disputes may only give rise to unforeseen complications.

If a solution were "found" through coercion and aggression, harmony would remain elusive. If any refugees were to be repatriated and resettled successfully in Bhutan, the first place they must find is in the hearts of the people. It is time for the people of both Nepal and Bhutan to set aside the politics of mudslinging and vitriolic reports and work towards a neighbourly amity.

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