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Triumph of Democracy Bhutan Elections 2013

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Triumph of Democracy

Bhutan Elections 2013



Marian Gallenkamp
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Five years ago, the first democratic elections in Bhutan and the promulgation of the country's constitution marked the beginning of a new era for the Bhutanese people and a crowning achievement for King Jigme Singye Wangchuck's bold and yet provident vision for the nation. Despite many observers' and analysts' skepticism about the prospects of a successful transition and the sincerity of the monarchy's intentions and support for democracy, Bhutan continued steadfastly on its path towards democratic consolidation. Although that road might have had its bends and bumps, the new political system and its actors (politicians, civil servants and the public alike) have proven to be committed and adaptive while creating precedence for, and discussing the interpretation of the 'rules of the game'.

Five years later, though not all of the critics and skeptics have been silenced, Bhutan has proven to itself and the world that despite difficulties, disputes and detours, democracy has been a success story for the country. Politicians and citizens alike have learned to make use of the new system, civil society has opened up and became more diverse, and the free flow of political ideas and opinions has enriched public debate. Bhutan's second parliamentary election and the resulting peaceful change of government mark a successful end of its democratic transition and a big leap on the country's path towards consolidation.

I THE CONTESTANTS: OLD AND NEW PARTIES

Despite being probably one of the world's smallest democratically elected oppositions, the two representatives of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) took their role and responsibility very seriously, trying to check on and criticizing the work of the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) government. In 2012, the government on the other hand got somewhat derailed by an economic crisis, blindsiding neighborly overtures, and a large-scale corruption scandal, so that by year's end alternative political platforms had formed and awaited official registration.

In January 2013, the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) officially registered three new political parties, bringing the field of contestants up from two parties in 2008 to five: Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) headed by (former) Prime Minister Jigme Y. Thinley, People's Democratic Party (PDP) headed by (former) Opposition Leader Tshering Tobgay, Bhutan Kuen-Nyam Party (BKP) headed by Sonam Tobgay, Druk Chirwang Tshogpa (DCT) headed by Lily Wangchuk, and Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) headed by Dorji Choden. All three new political parties, BKP, DCT and DNT,

described themselves as center-left and social democratic. While their key issues were somewhat similar (poverty eradication, empowerment of women, the rural poor and the citizenry in general, extension of health care facilities, social justice and equitable economic development) and differed only in nuances, their shared focus on ‘people-politics’ and the empowerment of individual voters, which was also stressed by the PDP, hinted towards a perceived disconnect between the ruling DPT’s policies and the ordinary people.

Bhutan’s electoral system, like so many other aspects of its polity, is quite unique in that it stipulates a two-round majority voting system. While this mode of election is common for the selection of the chief executive all over the world, i.e. in presidential systems, there are only few cases in which a two-round system for assembly elections applies.

While all parties were finalizing their manifestos and gearing up for the primary round of elections, a controversial decision by the ECB, to disqualify BKP from running in the primary election due to a lack of candidates in two constituencies, sparked a public debate that reflected upon a continuing problem of electoral politics in Bhutan: The difficulty of finding enough suitable and eligible candidates to stand for office. The problem was already apparent in the first National Council (NC) election 2007/08, where polling had to be postponed in some districts due to a lack of candidates. It once again resurfaced during the extensive local government elections in 2011, where, despite a total of 2,185 candidates, 370 elected offices remained vacant and in another 535 districts only one candidate stood for election.

While the second NC election in 2013 produced more candidates (67 compared to 48 in 2007/08), there still remained two districts with only one candidate. The BKP was honest enough to admit to not having a candidate in all constituencies and the ECB’s decision was technically correct. However, the public debate that followed also discussed the fact that the other parties had similar problems but prevented the BKP’s fate by simply putting forward complete lists of candidates knowing full well that they were going to review and change candidates should they make it into the general election. The remaining four political parties came out strong in support of the BKP, but to no avail. The ECB upheld its earlier decision and while the BKP was barred from contesting the primary election, it remained to be a registered party.⁰

Bhutan’s electoral system, like so many other aspects of its polity, is quite unique in that it stipulates a two-round majority voting system. While this mode of election is common for the selection of the chief executive all over the world, i.e. in presidential systems, there are only few cases in which a two-round system for assembly elections applies (most notably in France). Unlike in these few cases however, regulations in Bhutan provide for the second round of elections to be contested by the two strongest parties from the primary round. This system is geared towards ensuring not only a 50% +x majority support for each winning candidate, but also that only two parties can enter the National Assembly in order to provide for a clear separation between the government and opposition and their respective responsibilities.

In order to ensure a calm and fair campaign, the ECB had previously issued a number of rules and guidelines for the conduct of campaigning that featured, amongst others, the holding of common forums in all 205 gewogs of Bhutan, where representatives of all contesting parties were given the opportunity of presenting their respective party’s manifesto and reply to the voters’ questions. To a large extent, the campaign for the primary election was conducted in a calm and factual manner with results from the common forums being mixed at best, since a number of forums were cancelled, individual candidates did not attend, or voter turnout was poor. There were also two televised debates, one between the parties’ presidents relating to party ideologies and a second, issue-based debate between party presidents or representatives.

On polling day, 31 May 2013, voter turnout was low with only 55.27% nationwide (and a total of 13 constituencies where turnout was below 50%). Although constituency-wise results were not relevant since the national votes cast determines which two parties move on to contest the general round of elections, the enlarged field of contestants clearly played out in favor of the DPT, which received 44.5% of the votes and was the strongest party in 33 constituencies.

Table 1: Election Result Primary Round

Party	No. of votes	% of votes	No. of constituencies 'won' simple / absolute majority
DPT	93,724	44.5%	18 / 15
PDP	68,545	32.5%	6 / 6
DNT	35,941	17.1%	2 / 0
DCT	12,453	5.9%	0 / 0
No. of constituencies with 'opposition' vote share > 50%: 30			

While the PDP won approximately the same share of votes than in 2008 (32.5%), it was able to come in first in 12 constituencies. The two new parties did not stand a chance with the DNT securing 17.1% (and being strongest in two constituencies) and the DCT getting 5.9%. While the PDP won app.

the same percentage of votes as in 2008, it was able to receive a majority of votes in 12 constituencies (as compared to two in 2008). Even though the results for the DPT seem to be impressive, a closer look reveals that its primary victory was somewhat illusive. The nature of Bhutan's electoral system strongly favors the incumbent party in the primary election, since voters who are not satisfied and want to see change can chose from more than one option, thereby splitting the overall 'opposition' vote share. Since only two parties may contest the general election, the most likely voter behavior of supporters for unsuccessful parties can be expected to be a shift in support towards the second strongest party from the primary. Considering that the overall 'opposition' vote share in the primary election summed up to 55.5% and that 18 out of 33 constituencies in which the DPT came in first were won by only a simple majority, the likelihood for a tight race between DPT and PDP was high.

As expected, the campaign for the general election heated up and the tone between the two parties got rougher. Both parties began throwing allegations and counter-allegations at each other and before polling day, 37 complaints were lodged with the ECB which repeatedly reprimanded both parties (as compared to only seven during the primary campaign). The first serious dispute evolved when a number of unsuccessful DNT members (including the party's president) switched horses and joined PDP to stand as candidates. The DPT accused its rival of unconstitutional coalition building, a claim that was rebutted by the PDP and eventually dismissed by the ECB, because chapter 12 section 209c of the Election Act of Bhutan specifically allows for the nomination of such candidates.. Things continued to heat up and climaxed following India's withdrawal of crucial economic subsidies to Bhutan less than two weeks before the election. With the alleged deterioration of Indo-Bhutan relations dominating the media, public debate and election campaign, leading DPT members suspended their campaign to meet in the capital. The move was not well received by the public since it looked like populist actionism and an interference of the former government in the executive authorities of the interim government.

Despite the prolonged arguing and bickering of the campaign, polling day saw a rise in voter turnout with 66.1%, or 252,485 votes cast out of 381,790 registered voters. To the surprise of many observers, the DPT was not at all able to capitalize on its good results from the primary round.

Despite the prolonged arguing and bickering of the campaign, polling day saw a rise in voter turnout with 66.1%, or 252,485 votes cast out of 381,790 registered voters. To the surprise of many observers, the DPT was not at all able to capitalize on its good results from the primary round. Although it received roughly an additional 20,000 votes, its vote share stagnated and rose only marginally to 45.1%. In contrast, the PDP

was able to double the number of votes cast in its favor, gaining 54.9% of the national vote. It appears that the majority of voters that voted for the new political parties or did not vote at all in the primary round, decided in favor of PDP and voted for change. From a mere two seats and being one of the world's smallest democratically elected oppositions in Bhutan's first parliament, the PDP received a powerful mandate to govern by sweeping even a good number of former DPT strongholds in the East and South of Bhutan.

Table 2: Election Result General Round

Party	No. of votes	% of votes	No. of seats	% of seats
PDP	138,558	54.9%	32	68.1%
DPT	113,927	45.1%	15	31.9%

The PDP's strategic decision to nominate seven former DNT members as candidates played out very well with only two of them

losing their constituencies against a DPT candidate. Furthermore, the nomination of former DNT members made the PDP nationally more appealing to DNT supporters. Out of a total of 27 constituencies where DNT received more than 10% of votes in the primary but the DPT came in first, 16 featured a PDP candidate as winner in the general round of elections.

Table 3: Constituency Results of former DNT members

Constituency	Primary Result for DCT in %	Primary Result for DNT in %	Primary Result for PDP in %	primary opposition' vote share	Primary Result for DPT in %	General Election Result for DPT in %	General Election Result for PDP in %	Winner Primary/General Round
Thrimshing	2,79	61,74	10,97	75,50	24,51	31,91	68,09	DNT / PDP
Monggar	3,26	34,43	15,31	53,00	47,01	47,71	52,29	DPT / PDP
Kanglung_Samkhar_Udorong	4,16	21,75	21,52	47,43	52,57	49,98	50,02	DPT / PDP
Bardo_Trong	3,09	36,81	19,68	59,58	40,42	41,73	58,27	DPT / PDP
Panbang	4,30	19,15	26,55	50,00	50,00	50,56	49,44	DPT / DPT
Jomotshangkha_Martshala	4,62	13,82	34,23	52,67	47,33	43,67	56,33	DPT / PDP
Radhi_Sagteng	5,03	15,49	24,45	44,97	55,03	55,24	44,76	DPT / DPT

Another observation from the electoral statistics is that the increase in voter turnout has predominantly helped the PDP during the

election. It appears that the DPT was not able to mobilize a sufficient number of voters in many of the constituencies where it was leading during the primary election. The PDP on the other hand won 29 out of a total of 35 constituencies that saw an increase in turnout of more than 8% (see figure 1 for details).

Additionally, the DPT also lost all constituencies in which the race was very tight during the primary election (i.e. less than 5% winning margin between first and second placed party). Of the 15 constituencies the DPT won in both rounds of elections, its winning margin decreased considerably in all but four, making it a head to head race in five constituencies where it only won by a razor-thin margin of less than 2.5%. Furthermore it lost its substantial lead (more than 10%) from the primaries, and thus the constituencies during the general election, in 11 cases (see figure 2 for more details).

Figure 1: Voter Turnout by Constituency for Primary and General Election

Constituency	Turnout Primary Election	Turnout General Election	Difference	Winner Prim./Gen.
Sergithang_Tsirang Toed	50,39	72,09	21,69	PDP / PDP
Kilkhorthang_ Mendrelgang	54,80	74,07	19,26	DPT / PDP
Tashichhoeling	53,73	71,18	17,46	PDP / PDP
Dophuchen_ Tading	53,55	69,82	16,27	DPT / PDP
Ugyentse_ Yoeseitse	54,98	71,04	16,07	PDP / PDP
Lhamoi Dzingkha_ Tashiding	56,16	72,12	15,96	DPT / PDP
Phuentshogpelri_Samtse	59,38	74,95	15,58	DPT / PDP
Shompangkha	55,50	70,88	15,38	DPT / PDP
Draagteng_ Langthil	57,24	71,91	14,68	DPT / PDP
Bji_Kar-Tshog_Uesu	66,77	79,75	12,98	PDP / PDP
Drukjeygang_Tseza	58,21	71,18	12,96	DPT / PDP
Bongo_ Chapchha	60,70	73,26	12,56	PDP / PDP
Lingmukha_ Toedwang	61,03	73,36	12,33	PDP / PDP
Phuentshogling	61,41	73,67	12,26	DNT / PDP
Chhumig_ Ura	63,31	75,25	11,94	DPT / PDP
Kabisa_ Talog	59,82	71,54	11,71	PDP / PDP
Athang_ Thedtsho	61,60	72,93	11,33	PDP / PDP
Dokar_Sharpa	67,39	78,31	10,91	PDP / PDP
Monggar	53,09	63,83	10,73	DPT / PDP
Khamdang_ Ramjar	48,40	58,75	10,35	DPT / PDP
Nyishog_ Saephu	66,97	77,23	10,26	PDP / PDP
Wamrong	48,30	58,46	10,16	DPT / PDP
Radhi_ Sagteng	49,08	58,75	9,66	DPT / DPT
Gelegphu	54,02	63,61	9,59	DPT / PDP
Nubi_ Tangsibji	61,51	70,76	9,25	DPT / DPT
Dewathang_ Gomdar	52,21	61,35	9,13	DPT / PDP
Panbang	46,80	55,84	9,03	DPT / DPT
Boomdeling_ Jamkhar	47,07	56,04	8,97	DPT / DPT
Maenbi_ Tsaenkhar	49,29	58,25	8,96	DPT / PDP
Jomotshangkha_ Martshala	50,00	58,84	8,84	DPT / PDP
Khamaed_ Lunana	67,23	75,96	8,72	DPT / PDP
Kanglung_ Samkhar_ Udzorong	48,07	56,78	8,71	DPT / PDP
Lamgong_ Wangchang	67,54	76,04	8,50	DPT / DPT
Bardo_ Trong	49,29	57,61	8,31	DPT / PDP
South Thimphu	70,30	78,56	8,26	DPT / DPT
Sombaykha	61,19	68,30	7,11	PDP / PDP
Chhoekhor_ Tang	66,52	73,56	7,04	DPT / DPT
Khatoed_ Laya	81,93	88,91	6,98	PDP / PDP
Thrimshing	53,47	60,45	6,98	DNT / PDP
Bartsham_ Shongphu	45,33	52,22	6,89	DPT / DPT
Khar_ Yurung	47,10	53,50	6,40	DPT / DPT
Kengkhar_ Weringla	47,20	52,70	5,50	DPT / DPT
Dramedtse_ Ngatshang	53,18	58,66	5,48	DPT / DPT
North Thimphu	64,12	69,32	5,21	DPT / DPT
Nanong_ Shumar	52,25	57,45	5,20	DPT / DPT
Gangzur_ Minjey	49,19	53,87	4,69	DPT / DPT
Nganglam	58,09	60,54	2,45	DPT / DPT

Figure 2: Winning Margins by Constituency for Primary and General Election

Constituency	Winning Margin Primary Round	Winning Margin General Round	Difference Primary/General Round	Winner Primary/General Round
Nganglam	67,65	66,32	-1,33	DPT / DPT
Nanong_Shumar	51,93	57,46	5,53	DPT / DPT
Khar_Yurung	67,34	56,54	-10,80	DPT / DPT
Ugyentse_Yoeseltse	5,20	49,48	44,28	PDP / PDP
Tashichhoeling	9,45	43,94	34,49	PDP / PDP
Phuentshogling	1,77	43,73	41,96	DNT / PDP
Sombaykha	50,69	42,80	-7,89	PDP / PDP
Phuentshogpelri_Samtse	4,56	40,93	36,37	DPT / PDP
Bongo_Chapchha	27,81	40,12	12,31	PDP / PDP
Kengkhar_Weringla	47,94	37,27	-10,67	DPT / DPT
Thrimshing	37,23	36,17	-1,06	DNT / PDP
Sergithang_Tsirang Toed	3,82	35,71	31,89	PDP / PDP
Bartsham_Shongphu	39,43	34,78	-4,65	DPT / DPT
Kilkhorthang_Mendrelgang	4,40	31,93	27,53	DPT / PDP
Shompangkha	16,77	29,79	13,02	DPT / PDP
Dophuchen_Tading	8,80	29,10	20,30	DPT / PDP
Chhoekhor_Tang	34,92	28,53	-6,39	DPT / DPT
Lhamoi Dzingkha_Tashiding	6,38	24,15	17,77	DPT / PDP
Drukjeygang_Tseza	17,22	23,45	6,23	DPT / PDP
Dramedtse_Ngatshang	35,31	23,14	-12,17	DPT / DPT
Kabisa_Talog	18,47	21,52	3,05	PDP / PDP
Dokar_Sharpa	19,94	19,91	-0,02	PDP / PDP
Athang_Thedtsho	13,75	19,76	6,01	PDP / PDP
Gangzur_Minjey	16,56	17,81	1,25	DPT / DPT
Bardo_Trong	3,61	16,54	12,93	DPT / PDP
Bji_Kar-Tshog_Uesu	18,74	13,25	-5,48	PDP / PDP
Jomotshangkha_Martshala	13,11	12,67	-0,44	DPT / PDP
Lamgong_Wangchang	19,14	12,48	-6,66	DPT / DPT
Draagteng_Langthil	1,12	12,23	11,11	DPT / PDP
Khatoed_Laya	4,60	10,72	6,12	PDP / PDP
Radhi_Sagteng	30,58	10,49	-20,09	DPT / DPT
Chhumig_Ura	6,14	10,21	4,07	DPT / PDP
Maenbi_Tsaenkar	18,48	9,34	-9,15	DPT / PDP
Gelegphu	13,35	8,41	-4,93	DPT / PDP
Lingmukha_Toedwang	2,96	7,82	4,86	PDP / PDP
Dewathang_Gomdar	11,84	4,97	-6,87	DPT / PDP
Nyishog_Saephu	11,16	4,79	-6,37	PDP / PDP
Monggar	12,58	4,57	-8,00	DPT / PDP
Khamdang_Ramjar	16,76	3,58	-13,19	DPT / PDP
Boomdeling_Jamkhar	23,07	2,49	-20,58	DPT / DPT
Nubi_Tangsibji	27,04	2,31	-24,72	DPT / DPT
South Thimphu	15,03	2,26	-12,78	DPT / DPT
Wamrong	16,96	1,27	-15,69	DPT / PDP
Panbang	23,45	1,11	-22,34	DPT / DPT
North Thimphu	8,97	0,81	-8,16	DPT / DPT
Khamaed_Lunana	18,35	0,28	-18,07	DPT / PDP
Kanglung_Samkhar_Udzorong	30,82	0,04	-30,78	DPT / PDP

II THE EXPLANATIONS WHY THE PDP WON AND WHAT INDIA HAD TO DO WITH IT

While it is quite difficult to explain the election outcome due to an acute lack of public opinion surveys, the results provide enough hints to elucidate observers. Firstly, a general anti-incumbency has been observable, already starting with the NC election, in which only six of the 14 incumbents were reelected. Since the PDP only held two seats in the first parliament, it did not have to suffer from that anti-incumbency backlash, while the DPT was widely held accountable for e.g. the worsening of the economic situation in Bhutan. Secondly, the Gyalpoizhing land case, a severe case of corruption in which high-ranking DPT members were involved, greatly diminished public trust in the DPT government. Thirdly, it was perceived that especially during the campaign for the general round of elections, the DPT was too much immersed in criticizing the PDP program and candidates, missing out on providing the voters with a clear vision for the country and explaining to them how the DPT program would benefit the people. Fourthly, and closely related to the previous point, the DPT was accused of too much 'seeking the international limelight' and being big on 'GNH talk', but losing the vital connection to the people at home. While for outsiders the talk about Gross National Happiness might seem like a phony ideal or metaphor, it matters deeply and is of great importance for the Bhutanese people (at least as long as it can be translated into viable policy initiatives). Lastly, the factor of personality should not be underestimated. The new Prime Minister and former Opposition Leader, Tshering Tobgay, convincingly depicted himself as an accessible, deeply committed and humble 'servant' of the people, who, from this author's personal point of view, did a tremendously good and laudable job during his first five years as a member of parliament.

Since India is Bhutan's most important development, diplomatic, economic and security partner, the election results have also to be discussed in light of the subsidy withdrawal. Given the fact that Bhutan proved once again that it is the politically most stable country in India's neighborhood, India's puzzling and controversial decision to withdraw vital economic subsidies to Bhutan only two weeks before the general election has sparked a heated debate in both countries, indicating that Bhutan's maturing democracy has left both nations' bilateral relations no longer sacrosanct. India's decision on 1 July 2013 to withdraw all subsidies on kerosene and LPG for Bhutan amidst the country's already heated election campaign left most analysts and observers perplexed and caught Bhutan completely off-guard. Shortly afterwards, the media reported that India was also considering a revision of power tariffs from the Chukha hydropower project. While these actions resulted in a complete shift in the electoral campaign from which it did not recover until polling day, there are two narratives from India trying to explain what happened: On the one side, the whole incident is portrayed as one of India's worst foreign relations 'goof-ups' in recent years, possibly alienating the one and only reliable and completely supporting neighbor it has. The BJP opposition vociferously criticized the government for what happened, while official statements spoke of 'unfortunate timing' and assured that this was an ordinary decision without any intention of influencing the electoral process or 'sending a message' to Bhutan. On the other hand, there are reports about an internal MEA note according to which the GoI has been upset and unsatisfied with Bhutan's perceived 'coziness' with China and the royal government's intransparency, following which "New Delhi should 'demonstrate [its] seriousness through some concrete expression of displeasure'". A case in point can be seen in the fact that India broke its diplomatic silence immediately after the elections and subsidies were reinstated on 1 August 2013.

However, most observers, including this author, agree that the, admittedly bad, 'hiccup' in bilateral relations was not a factor that determined the outcome of the elections. It may have added to the lack of satisfaction with and trust in the work of the former government that was also made accountable for the 'rupee crunch', but at the end of the day, it were the Bhutanese people who clearly voted for a change. This is not to say

India's decision on 1 July 2013 to withdraw all subsidies on kerosene and LPG for Bhutan amidst the country's already heated election campaign left most analysts and observers perplexed and caught Bhutan completely off-guard

that New Delhi should not have to do an honest mea culpa in order to restore trust. Even though it became once more obvious just how extensively Bhutan is dependent on support from India in almost all fields, the awareness of the problems that come with such dependency is steadily rising in Bhutan.

III THE CONSEQUENCES

A SOUR LOSER AND A DILIGENT NEW GOVERNMENT

While the DPT legally had the right to raise these accusations, no matter well-founded, and to basically shoot against almost anyone and any direction, it did not use the official election petition period to address its grievances, but decided to directly petition the king, demanding that the issues be dealt with before taking up its role as opposition party.

The immediate aftermath of the elections was marked by utter disbelief and disappointment in the DPT camp and a rather moderate and restraint elation in the PDP camp. However, it did not take long for the DPT to start the blame-game over the causes of its colossal loss. A mere week after the elections, party members gathered in Thimphu for a convention and quickly word got out that the DPT's elected candidates were urged and considered not to take up the role of opposition in parliament. A similarly dramatic stunt took place shortly after the withdrawal of Indian subsidies to Bhutan, when the party leadership announced to drop out of the race, if people would hold DPT responsible for the perceived deterioration of Indo-Bhutan relations. A 15-pint petition was drafted, accusing the PDP of corrupt campaign practices (mainly due to the fact the cases which were previously filed with the Election Dispute Settlement Bodies were not resolved to the DPT's satisfaction) and unconstitutional coalition building (an accusation that was already clearly dismissed during a meeting between party presidents and the Chief Election Commissioner during the campaign).

The Interim Government was accused of untimely intervention in the aftermath of the subsidy withdrawal and its chief advisor, Dasho Karma Ura, was attacked for allegedly violating political neutrality after publishing an article in Kuensel in order to inform the general public and explain the subsidy withdrawal. Furthermore, election officials were accused of manipulation of postal ballot counts, the media was accused of unbalanced coverage, the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industries for allegedly campaigning for PDP, as were local government officials. Also, the DPT complained about accusations against it related to corruption (it did not deny corruption but complained that criminal offenses were committed a long time ago) and the straining of relations with India (which it emphatically repudiated). The petition also claims that most army personal were coerced to vote for PDP and even complaints about a PDP candidate not attending a public election debate. While the DPT legally had the right to raise these accusations, no matter well-founded, and to basically shoot against almost anyone and any direction, it did not use the official election petition period to address its grievances, but decided to directly petition the king, demanding that the issues be dealt with before taking up its role as opposition party. This bold move was in disregard of due process and good practice, raising the serious question of whether the DPT acted prudent or compromised its integrity by it. There is no information available about the details of the DPT's audience with His Majesty (whether the king shared DPT's concerns or maybe reprimanded it for its felt impertinence), but it officially announced that it would take up the opposition role after being reassured by the king. However, the ECB has not commented or decided on the petition as of yet.

Meanwhile, former Prime Minister and DPT party-president Jigme Y. Thinley announced directly after the election that he would serve as opposition with the same dedication he did when being PM and he would be available for being elected opposition leader by his party. However, when DPT members elected Pema Gyamtsho as opposition leader during their convention in Thimphu, it became suspiciously silent around the person of Jigme Y. Thinley. Rumors were fueled by his absence during the National Assembly's first sitting on 3 August 2013, where all members took the oath of affirmation of office. Two days later, news broke that the former PM had submitted his resignation on 31 July 2013. Thinley's decision was controversially debated by the public, media and politicians since it set a far reaching precedence. The newly elected

Speaker of the National Assembly, Jigme Zangpo, took his time to decide upon the issue before eventually accepting the resignation on 10 August 2013. With the former PM's seat being vacant, a by-election will be held in his constituency within 90 days.

On the other side of the political aisle, the new Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay presented the members of his cabinet on 26 July 2013. While four ministers were selected from constituencies in Eastern Bhutan (despite the PDP's electoral victory still a stronghold of DPT) and three from Southern Bhutan (in both cases an increase in representation by one minister compared to the DPT government), two ministers were chosen from the western and one from the central districts of Bhutan. The new cabinet also features the first woman minister (a reassuring sign towards gender-equality given the stark under-representation of women in parliament) with Dorji Choden heading the Ministry of Works and Human Settlement. In one of its first decisions, the cabinet held on to a PDP campaign promise by abolishing the controversial Pedestrians Day rule, enacted by the former government in 2012. The new government got quickly down to business, beginning deliberations on the Tenancy Act and a new stimulus package to help the ailing economy. In early August Indian National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon and Foreign Secretary Sujatha Singh visited Thimphu and held meetings with the king, as well as the new Prime Minister and Opposition Leader. The kick start of bilateral consultations and talks with the new government was followed by negotiations over Indian assistance for Bhutan's 11th five-year-plan in mid-August, the final results of which will be confirmed during the new Prime Minister's state visit to India. Bhutan had requested Rs. 45 billion from the Government of India and both sides announced their satisfaction over the results of the talks.

As it is with elections in general, and in young democracies in particular, the hopes and expectations placed upon a new government are tremendous. Though Bhutanese clearly voted for a change, the pace and extent of change is not only dependent on the willingness of the new government to stand by its campaign promises, but will also be contingent upon issues and developments that are well out of reach for the government. Given the current economic situation which is still marked by a shortage of Indian rupees and a hefty current account deficit, costly policy issues – like introducing an allowance for senior citizens, a 20% housing allowance for civil servants, a pay revision for civil servants and local government leaders, annual development grants for each of the 205 gewogs and tax-cuts for small and rural business owners – will likely have to be reconsidered within given budgetary constraints. Since no government can solve long lasting problems and fix structural problems over night, much will depend on the new government's ability to convincingly communicate such problems and the limits of its own political latitude to the public. It is with regard to this ability that a window of opportunity for introducing substantial change presents itself: The PDP government's proposal to initiate a weekly 'meet the people' program could well prove to be one of the most important innovations for Bhutan's political culture by securing a constant public feedback mechanism as well as ensuring governmental accountability and responsiveness. The effort to transform the accessibility of day to day politics from a 'game' played by affluent elites towards a more encompassing and inclusive process is not only possible in a small country like Bhutan, it will also help with governmental transparency, enhance the quality of public debate and raise citizens' awareness. The same holds true for the introduction of the Right to Information Act for which the new Prime Minister already lobbied tirelessly during his term as Opposition Leader and which was prevented by the former government.

While it is fairly certain that Bhutan, under the new government, will recalibrate its focus to domestic affairs and probably undergo some critical introspection with regard to a number of policies, this will not alter the relevance of the two single most important foreign policy issues for Bhutan: the bilateral relationship with India and the lingering diplomatic negotiations with China. With regard to the former, one can confidently claim that India's intentional or accidental involvement during the election process has done more harm than good in terms of serving its long term interests. India

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played a risky game with the political stability of its closest ally in the region, who also happens to be its democratically most successful and peaceful neighbor. Regardless of whether India preferred a PDP government and if its actions influenced the outcome of elections (and that is a big if), the resulting debate in Bhutan, which did not limit itself to the question of whether the DPT government was responsible for a perceived deterioration of relations, but also centered around the issue of Bhutan's overly dependence on India, raised public and political awareness of the relationship's downsides considerably.

It would be a wrong assumption to assume that one Bhutanese party is inherently more India friendly than another, since, on the one hand the crucial importance and unique friendship between both countries is not being questioned by anyone and on the other hand the plain reality of Bhutan being dependent on Indian aid and support to realize its own vision of development is not being denied either. With regard to the second issue, it might appear reasonable to assume that the PDP government is more China skeptical than the old government was, but one should seriously question the room to maneuver for Bhutan in this conflict. Bhutan appears to have politely stalled the settlement of the border for quite some time now and it was also able to avert Beijing's diplomatic overtures. But considering China's illegal road construction in disputed territories, military incursions and its tolerance of Tibetans' cross border movements, it stands to reason that the Chinese might intensify such actions and become more assertive when they get impatient with an all too reluctant Bhutanese government.

In conclusion, one can argue that, domestically, the chances that come with the new PDP government outweigh the challenges it will have to face. Plans to extent social welfare, ensure governmental transparency and positively alter political culture are promising (though partly dependent on the overall economic development). The media's interpretation that the new Prime Minister is an open skeptic of Bhutan's development philosophy of Gross National Happiness are only half true. Rather, he advocates to stop the government's political advocacy of happiness in the international arena and instead thoroughly reassess and reconsider how the ideal of GNH can be translated into viable and practical policies at home. Such introspection might very well quarry solutions to problems that have not been adequately addressed by the previous government. In terms of foreign policy, fundamental changes are unlikely since the government's leeway, at least within Bhutan's immediate neighborhood, is fairly limited. India will continue to play a pivotal role in Bhutan's foreign policy, while China remains eager to establish diplomatic relations and solve the border conflict in its own strategic interest. How the new government is going to deal with rising Chinese pressure remains to be seen, but apart from seeking even more help (diplomatically, economically and in terms of strategic cooperation) from India, which in turn would amount to a further loss of effective sovereignty over its own affairs, there is not much room to come up with innovative policy ideas for the new Prime Minister and his government.

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