

## The Politics of Bhutan: Change in Continuity

*Thierry Mathou\**

### **Introduction**

Although there is a certain degree of incompatibility between the Western-derived rhetoric relating to politicisation and Bhutanese practice, since the former may be irrelevant to the latter, challenges resulting from the politicisation process in Bhutan can be compared to what happened in all developing societies. As all traditional states, Bhutan has gone through two different stages in the modernisation of its polity. From the establishment of the monarchy in 1907 to the 1960's, the first challenge had been to "concentrate power necessary to produce changes in a weakly articulated and organised traditional society and economy". The second stage that consists in expanding "the power in the system to assimilate the newly mobilised and politically participant groups, in order to create a modern system"<sup>1</sup>, is still underway. Huntington's conclusion that such a process was necessarily fatal to any monarchical system lacking the western European political-cultural background has not yet been verified in Bhutan. On the contrary, the Bhutanese monarchy has been the main agent of modernisation. Since it opened to the outside world, in the early 1960s, the kingdom has adopted a unique path toward development. Promoting a distinctive approach to institutions building (polity) and governance orientations (policies), which is consistent both with tradition and modernity, has been essential to its survival.

The present paper is a tentative presentation of the normative architecture of the current Bhutanese polity. It identifies a hierarchy of principles and patterns, which have guided simultaneously the preservation of the traditional system and its adaptation to modern

---

\* Dr. Thierry Mathou is an Associated Researcher in the Himalayan Division of the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS- UPR 299) in Paris-Villejuif. He is also a career diplomat currently posted in Beijing China.

constraints. The main challenges are also described in order to assess the viability of the monarchy as the principal agent of change.

### **The Basic Principles of Bhutan's Polity**

The Bhutanese polity has been influenced by specific historical, cultural and religious factors. Its general profile can be drawn from five parameters: cultural identification, national independence, and tradition of consensus, synthesis capacity, and the role of hereditary monarchy.

### **Cultural Identification**

Building unity out of diversity has been one of the main threads of Bhutan's political history. Since its emergence as a single political entity, during the 17th century, the country had to face various periods of external aggression and internal strife. The creation of a nation-state has been dependant upon the definition of a Bhutanese identity which is closely related with the dominant *Drukpa*<sup>1</sup> culture. The credit for unifying Bhutan and introducing its first codified laws, known as *Chathrim*, goes to *Zhabdrung* Ngawang Namgyal (1616-1651) who was instrumental in founding a new country and asserting its religious and political independence from Tibet. Among other achievements, he secured the dominant position of the *Drukpa Kagyu* school that gave the country its local name - *Drukyul*: the land of the *Drukpa* sect - and forged its religious and cultural history. Common traditions, including a dress code and distinctive rituals with Bhutanese characteristics, date back from that period. *Dzongkha*, the only language with a native tradition in Bhutan, which became the national language in 1961, was also decisive in building a sense of solidarity among the people. Eventually, the unification of Bhutan was completed when the theocratic rule was replaced by an hereditary monarchy. An oath of allegiance -*Genja*- was sworn in 1907 by the most important civil and monastic officials, along with the people's representatives, who jointly pledged their support to and appointed Ugyen Wangchuck as first

---

<sup>1</sup> All italic words can be found in the *Dzongkha* Transcription-Transliteration Table and Glossary, at the end of the paper.

king of Bhutan.<sup>2</sup> Although there is "no evidence in available sources, that anything resembling an election was actually used in 1907 in the events that preceded the recognition of Ugyen Wangchuck as *Druk Gyalpo*",<sup>3</sup> "the decision to establish monarchy appeared to have been genuinely popular not only among those responsible for taking it but also with the public at large".<sup>4</sup> This episode was decisive in the nation building process. It was also a major factor of cultural identification.

As the last Mahayana kingdom, Bhutan has inherited a philosophy of life which is deep rooted in its religious traditions and institutions. Basic values like compassion, respect for life and nature, social harmony, compromise, and prevalence of individual development over material achievements have had direct impact on policy making. Achieving a "balance between spiritual and material aspects of life, between *Peljor Gongphel* (economic development) and *Gakid* (happiness and peace)"<sup>5</sup> is both a cultural imperative and a political objective. Because Bhutan is located between two giant neighbours that could threaten its independence at any moment, the concept of survival has become the geopolitical prolongation of its sense of insecurity. For that reason, cultural identification and the need to preserve what can be described as the "Bhutanese exception", both in cultural and political terms, is perceived by the regime as essential to the viability of the current system, and to the independence of the kingdom. That explains why the *Drukpa* culture is still inspiring current institutions.

### **National Independence**

Despite its strategic location, Bhutan has never been colonised, nor by the Tibetans who tried to invade it after it became a distinct entity, neither by the British who imposed their rule over the Indian subcontinent. Contrary to most developing countries, it entered the 20th century without a complex of inferiority and subservience vis-à-vis foreigners. From its point of view, national independence has had three major correlations: the autonomy of the local polity, a strong sense of national pride, and a culture of isolationism.

None of the large ideological movements that spread through the third world after the Second World War affected the kingdom. Bhutan escaped the concepts of nationalist political movements that led to India's independence and spread to Nepal and Sikkim. Socialism or liberalism is irrelevant to the Bhutanese polity, at least in its present form. Political consciousness has always been very low among the general populace. The politicisation process that had significant impact on large sections of the population in all other parts of South Asia has not mobilised Bhutanese crowds, except for Nepali Bhutanese in the southern districts. That the average Bhutanese is only poorly educated and clearly has priorities that lay outside of the political sphere has been decisive in that respect.

Bhutan has not imported foreign institutions nor political parties, even during the 1960's when the kingdom was placed under the pressure of India that played a decisive role in the modernisation process. Concerns have arisen at that time about the influence of India in the decision-making process in Bhutan. In the mid-1960's, the role of Indian officers in the kingdom caused great controversy. Many Indian officers were in charge of day-to-day operations because the Bhutanese administration lacked human resources. In 1963 the king accepted the appointment of an "Indian adviser" to assist him. However Indian influence on the administrative level never had direct impact on the polity itself.<sup>6</sup> The prominent position assumed by Dorji family members until the assassination, in 1964, of the *Lonchen*, who was the closest to a prime minister, did not alter the nature of the system as the king assumed both the role of head of state and head of the government.

As a result, the Bhutanese people have inherited a strong sense of national pride. The kingdom has been dependant on external assistance to finance its modernisation. Yet, foreign donors have respected its approach to development, so that Bhutanese have the feeling of being the masters of their own future. Bhutan has always maintained a low profile on the international scene. Preserving its sovereignty has been one of the main objectives of its foreign policy. It has never considered the guidance clause included in the treaty it signed with India in 1949, as a limitation to its independence. On the

contrary, it used its special relation with India to gain entry to the United Nations as a country, which intended to exercise its full, and sovereignty rights.

Although Bhutan was not a secluded state, as often described, isolationism has generated a tradition of self-reliance and self-organisation among local communities that developed their own regulations, unwritten laws, practices and customs. The sharing of irrigation water and grazing land, and the use of common labour for infrastructures and monasteries maintenance are part of that heritage. Because local communities were confronted with difficult geographical and climatic conditions, they had to count on their own capabilities to organise their life. Trade had an important role in traditional Bhutan. Yet, the country was not organised as a commercial hub. Its social and political structures were mostly inward looking. Once settled in their valleys, farmers had few contacts with the outside world. Therefore "maintaining the sovereignty of the kingdom through economic self-reliance" has become a national objective.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Tradition of Consensus**

As noted by Michael Aris, most Bhutanese consider that "violence at best provides only an interim solution, and at worst merely provokes a cycle of further conflict".<sup>8</sup> In the political tradition of Bhutan, peace and violence<sup>9</sup> represent the two wings of government that are supposed to be held in a kind of balance in the same way the sacred and secular spheres (*Chhösi*) or the samsara and nirvana (*Sizhi khordey*) form "unitary dualisms". Because the use of violence has been channelled by religious practice through tantric rituals, peace has become a system of government used by the civil administration known as the "Peaceful" (*Zhiwey Zhung yog*).<sup>10</sup> For that reason the "tradition of mediation" that emerged under the theocracy, is still prevalent under the current polity. Confrontation is refused as a solution to conflicts both at the local and national levels. What can be described as a "customs of negotiation and contestation"<sup>11</sup> has resulted in the building of a system where consensus is a mode of government.

The way major institutions operate is consistent with that concept. The monarchy itself was created on an act of consensus: the consensus was then to pacify the country and to centralise the power. Later on, the monarchy was cautious in making modernisation acceptable by all circles of the society, including local elite families<sup>12</sup> and the monk body. The people were also associated to the modernisation process through the promotion of a land reform and the use of the *Kidu* - welfare- system. The capacity of the monarchy to become the first agent of conciliation was essential in asserting its legitimacy. The same reason that makes the king the representative of the whole people, without distinction of ethnical, religious or political origins, explains why political parties are not allowed: they are not consistent with the tradition of consensus. Simultaneously, processes of negotiation have been invented to allow contestation to be channelled through concertation procedures. The National Assembly and local development committees (*GYTs* and *DYTs*<sup>13</sup>) fulfil that role. Discussions in these bodies are often vigorous as shown by the last sessions of the National Assembly. However, major decisions are always taken on the base of consensus after long debates.<sup>14</sup> The contest in the national elections -both in the Royal Advisory Council and in the National Assembly- is more and more vigorous, and therefore controversial. However, consensus still inspires election procedures. Even the newly created Council of Ministers (*Lhengye Zhungtshog*) is complying with that tradition: "as the ministers are all new, in order to discuss among themselves and decide by consensus, a Co-ordination Committee of the Council of Ministers (*Lhengye Nyamdrel Tshogchung*) has been established".

Consensus is also transpiring from Bhutanese legal codes. "Formal litigation is costly and there is a certain stigma attached to it. A dispute can instead be put to a respected and independent figure for adjudication, either lay or clerical. Sometimes intermediaries (*Jabmi*) will liaise between that person and the parties to the conflict. More formally, a case can be put to a village headman to negotiate a compromise settlement outside the court system. Usually a contract is drawn up and formally signed by the disputants and countersigned by those who have taken part at the settlement. Therefore the process of formal litigation in a court of law represents the total failure of the

community itself to effect a settlement. Even in a court the tendency is always to reach a settlement by amicable compromise rather than by decree. District courts have inherited the powers that was formally vested in the royal secretaries and courtiers who were assigned the task of resolving dispute by delegation of the king's power".<sup>15</sup> As the final court of appeal with authority to commute sentences and grant pardon, the king is the keeper of the tradition of consensus.<sup>16</sup>

### **Synthesis Capacity**

Independence does not mean ostracism towards foreign influence. On the contrary, Bhutan has shown a capacity to assimilate innovations, which are not harmful to its traditions, and to transform them into something consistent with the local system of values, which eventually become distinctively Bhutanese. This "Bhutanisation" process, which can be described as a synthesis capacity can be observed in the strategy of development itself. Coming late to the development scene, Bhutan was eager to avoid mistakes committed elsewhere. While strongly dependant on foreign aid and expertise, it was determined to follow its own set of priorities. As a result, development has been remarkably free from seeing economic, political, social, or cultural disruption. Building a well trained but lean bureaucracy and a modern system of education, both with western input but according to Bhutanese criteria, was essential in that process.

The same type of adaptation has taken place in the legal sector. The reorganisation of the judicial system back in the late 1960's, the development of the jurisprudence later on, the enactment of decisive acts, and the recent improvement of the judicial process through the development of a standardised civil and criminal court procedure participate to the modernisation of the overall system which has been enriched by principles of western origin. At the same time, the laws of Bhutan are locally-grown. It is still the 17th century *Zhabdrung's Chathrim* and its Buddhist values that inspire the judiciary. As noted by the Chief Justice who is very keen in theorising this combination: "We must draw inspiration from the wisdom of the past. At the same time, we must face the challenges of changing times".<sup>17</sup> For that reason the creation of an independat Office of Legal Affairs has been

proposed in 1999, in order to facilitate the evolution of the justice system to meet challenges ahead.

### **Hereditary Monarchy**

Bhutan has a very atypical monarchy. Compared to other countries, the institution is rather recent, at least in its present form. Yet, there is a cultural continuity with previous systems. Kingdoms were established in Bhutan long before the country was unified in the 18th century. Some of the local rulers, especially in the East, made a decisive contribution to the emergence of the founding myths of Bhutan.<sup>18</sup> The *Druk Desis* - leaders who, from 1751 to 1907, held secular powers, at least in theory, in the semi-theocracy system known as *Chhösi* - can be compared to kings although their status in the society was slightly different. In that respect, there is a monarchical tradition in Bhutan that goes far beyond the institution itself. It explains why the hereditary monarchy has become the main source of cohesion and consistency of the current polity.

The Bhutanese monarchy identifies closely with the religious legacy, on a rather distinctive mode. Contrary to the king of Nepal, who is a manifestation of Vishnu, the king of Bhutan is a secular monarch who did not inherit the religious authority of the *Zhabdrung*. Neither is he a *Chogyäl* in the Himalayan tradition. As the ruler of the *Drukpa* society, the *Druk Gyalpo* only inherited the secular powers of the *Druk Desi*.<sup>19</sup> He does not get his primary legitimacy from his divine ascendance, although the Wangchuck dynasty has a line of ancestors that goes back to the Dungkar *Chöje* of Kurtöe and to the famous saint Pemalingpa.<sup>20</sup> For that reason, he cannot be considered as an absolute monarch "in either theoretical or legal terms",<sup>21</sup> but as a "ruler by convention" as mentioned in the Buddhist tradition.<sup>22</sup> The mode of enthronement of the dynasty reminds the model of the first king of Buddhism legend, Mahasammata - Mangpö Kurwai Gyalpo, literally the King Elevated by Many- whose legitimacy was based on popular consent.

Although secular, the Bhutanese monarchy uses various religious symbols.<sup>23</sup> The *Druk Gyalpo* is "The Precious Master of Power and

King of *Drukgyul*".<sup>24</sup> He is addressed formally by the honorific word for foot "*Zhab*" - literally "In Front of the Feet"- a religious term which was also found in *Zhabdrung*. He occupies the "golden throne" and is the only one, apart from the *Je Khenpo*, to wear the yellow scarf. Both attributes are usually associated with high *Lamas*. His crown carries the head of a raven which is a reference to the religious history of the country.<sup>25</sup> The *Driglam Namzha* or code of etiquette that includes all formal behaviours observed not only in the presence of the king but in all ceremonial occasions, has been influenced by Buddhist values.<sup>26</sup> When enthroned, the king is vested with his formal powers during a ceremony held in the *dzong* of Punakha where he "presents a ceremonial white scarf, symbolising the purity of his intentions, to a scroll-painting of the protective deity of the realm, in the presence of the embalmed remains of the founding *Zhabdrung*. In return he receives a scarf of office as if from the very hands of the country's first unifier".<sup>27</sup> The *Druk Gyalpo* is supportive of the dharma and the sangha. The Mahayana figure of the bodhisattva who refuses nirvana to alleviate the sufferings of the world is seen by Bhutanese as applying to their king.<sup>28</sup>

The king is highly revered by the people. Yet he is very close to it. His standing is rather simple and palace ceremony is minimal, although recent trends have introduced more formality.<sup>29</sup> He often tours the country to meet with local communities and organise public debates. Any one can present grievance to him. His *kidu*, or welfare, can always be requested. The "elected" basis of the monarchy and the re-introduction in 1999 of a mechanism through which the National Assembly can register a vote of confidence in the king<sup>30</sup> enhance that dimension.

The hereditary monarchy has become the key factor of the "unitary dualism" which can be described as the main characteristic of the Bhutanese polity. His legitimacy mainly relies on his capacity to preserve the balance between tradition and modernity, religion and secularism on which depends "change in continuity".

### **The Impact of these Principles on the Governance System**

Institution-building and policy orientations have been deeply influenced by the above features, as shown by the national ideology and the decision-making process.

### **Bhutan's Distinctive Institutions: the Religious Factor**

With a few changes and some significant additions, most of the structures created by the founding *Zhabdrung* have been surviving under the present system. The principle of tripartite participation involving representatives of the people, the administration, and the community of monks, which is part of consensus politics, is prevalent among most political bodies in Bhutan. The National Assembly (*Tshogdu*) which was created in 1951, consists of three categories of members: 105 are elected by the people; 35 are nominated as ex-officio representatives of the government, and 10 are elected by the clergy. The Royal Advisory Council (*Lodoi Tshogde*) has the same type of structure. It consists of nine members: six elected representatives of the people, two elected representatives of the clergy and one nominee of the government who also serves as the chairman of the council. It was created in 1965 as part of the "modernisation" of institutions. Yet, it can be seen as the revival of the old state council (*Lhungye Tsok*) that was established during the 17th century by the *Zhabdrung*, and lost its relevance after endorsing the setting up of the monarchy. The cabinet itself (*Lhengye Zhungtshog*) as per the reform of 1998 is made up of ministers elected by the National Assembly, and the members of the Royal Advisory Council. While a small body inclusive only of elected members would have resembled closely the cabinet seen in Western parliamentary governments, a larger body is typical of Bhutanese governance.

Also typical is the role of monks in the polity. "The monastic order lacked strong leadership during the transitional period" to be capable of any effective action.<sup>31</sup> The termination of the theocracy might have generated frustration within the *Drukpa* monastic establishment, which has been progressively excluded from a critical role in the country polity.<sup>32</sup> The modus vivendi achieved between the hereditary

monarchy and the *Drukpa* monastic establishment proved mutually satisfactory and non confrontational. The institution of the *Je Khenpo* has never been endangered by the hereditary monarchy. While the *Druk Gyalpo* still exercises some sort of "indirect authority over the monastic establishment",<sup>33</sup> the *Je Khenpo* is the undisputed head of the *Dratshang*.<sup>34</sup> Religion has a "modern" role in contemporary Bhutan in the sense that monks have lost their political status and autonomy. They are heavily dependent upon the government for their financial support. The representatives of the monk body, in the National Assembly,<sup>35</sup> the Royal Advisory Council, and the local committees are mainly concerned with religious matters. The monastic establishment made no obstructions to reforms, although most of them eroded their influence.<sup>36</sup> Reportedly, they have even "supported most of the economic and social reform programs".<sup>37</sup>

Yet, their political influence should not be undermined, especially under the present context. Changes affecting the Bhutanese society are a major preoccupation for the monastic establishment, whose primary concern is the preservation of cultural identity and religious values. Conservatism has gained ground during the last decade. The introduction in 1989 of a code of etiquette echoed an old demand of the monastic establishment that requested in the early 1970's "civil officials wear traditional Bhutanese dress while on duty".<sup>38</sup> The role and place of religion are emphasised by public policy as part of preservation of the cultural heritage. A Council of Ecclesiastic Affairs (*Dratshang Lhentshog*), headed by the *Je Khenpo*, has been created in 1984. Existing religious institutions are being expanded and new ones established "in fulfilment of the command of the king and the wishes of the people in order to ensure that the Dharma teachings will continue to flourish".<sup>39</sup> Monks are encouraged to play a greater civic role. Many efforts have been done to improve their understanding of development issues, in order to use their influence in the Bhutanese society to promote health or environment consciousness. The election in 1996<sup>40</sup> of a younger *Je Khenpo* helped the monastic establishment to become more dynamic. Religious ceremonies of collective blessing and prayer (*Wang-lung-thri*) which are conducted all around the country by the *Je Khenpo*, in front of thousands of devotees, are the occasion to exhort the monks to become raw models for the society.

In order to stop the decline of religious values among the young generation and to address the current shortage of monks, instruction have been given to increase their number.<sup>41</sup> Ceremonies with a high degree of symbolism are often the occasion to celebrate the founding fathers of Bhutan and to proclaim the importance of religious values.<sup>42</sup> Eventually, the *Dratshang* brings its contribution to the modernisation process by adapting some of its traditional rules as shown by the recent reform of offerings.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Path Toward Modernisation**

Although major reforms were introduced soon after the third *Druk Gyalpo's* accession to the throne in 1952, it was only during the 1960's that the modernisation process became comprehensive. During that period, external factors<sup>44</sup>, to both the south and north signalled the end of Bhutan's insulation from disruptive forces and made policy innovations necessary. The personality of the third *Druk Gyalpo* was also decisive. Jigme Dorje Wangchuck was familiar with the mechanisms of reform in India, and somewhat sympathetic to the concept of modernisation itself. He was convinced that changes had to be brought to the kingdom through a guided program of development that would encompass political, administrative, economic and social reforms. Those reforms were better adopted under non-crisis conditions so that the monarchy could keep the lead, control the whole process, and avoid disruptive effects on traditional system and national unity that could have resulted from radical changes.

The present king has followed the same path. Contrary to what happens in most monarchical polities, he has always anticipated the needs for reform, which are usually claimed by the people. The absence of a modernising elite other than his immediate entourage and the low level of political consciousness of the people are largely responsible for that situation. His decision to devolve full executive powers to an elected cabinet, and to submit himself to a vote of confidence give indications about his personal vision: "The time has now come to promote greater people's participation in the decision making process. Our country must be ensured to always have a system of government which enjoys the mandate of the people, provides clean

and efficient governance, and also has an inbuilt mechanism of checks and balances to safeguard our national interest and security".<sup>45</sup>

The timing of the reform might have been influenced by external pressure regarding the need of a "democratic" evolution in Bhutan. Yet the king has followed his own pace of modernisation. He has "observed the political systems of other countries" and does not exclude further institutional changes. The mention of "checks and balances" could be a reference to a parliamentary regime with a constitutional monarchy that could eventually be adopted in Bhutan. The implementation of such a system would require further reforms, including the introduction of party based elections. Because the current polity "cannot afford to have the divisive forces of communalism come into play in the election of the Council of Ministers", this type of reform is not on the official agenda, at least for the moment. Nevertheless the king has decided to put his own destiny in the balance through the introduction of a "mechanism for a vote of confidence in the *Druk Gyalpo*", as a testimony of his democratic ambitions.

### **The National Ideology**

Theocratic tradition prevailing before the establishment of the monarchy provided little ideological support to the new regime other than religious principles. The ruling elite has never complied with any dogmatic approach. Pragmatism and a predilection for gradualism has been its guiding principles. Political rhetoric has been little stultifying. As already noted, Bhutan does not classify itself in terms of socialist or liberal policies, although egalitarianism has occasionally appeared in public statements, including recently at the occasion of the debate on the introduction of an income tax.<sup>46</sup>

Yet, ideological considerations can be used to analyse new political behaviours. After Bhutan opened to the outside world, the official rhetoric tended to be modernist in content, due to the influence of foreign patterns, essentially coming from India, and to the requirements of development. While modernisation is still essential, the importance of conservatory policies and preservation of national heritage has been underlined. The two rhetorics have been merged

under the catchphrase of "Gross National Happiness" (GNH). "Apart from the obvious objectives of development: to increase GDP on a national level and incomes at the household level, development in Bhutan includes the achievement of less quantifiable objectives. These include ensuring the emotional well-being of the population, the preservation of Bhutan's cultural heritage and its rich and varied natural resources.<sup>47</sup>" The concept of GNH was first introduced by the king in the late 1980's but the term is "a popularisation of the distinct Bhutanese perception of the fundamental purpose of development, which can be traced throughout the period of development".<sup>48</sup> It is a "translation of a cultural and social consciousness into development priorities", in a country which perceives itself "as a kind of Mandala, a place where Man can transform their infrastructure, polity and social organisations to create Gross National Happiness".<sup>49</sup>

The tendency to describe the concept with reference to the Buddhist cosmology, is a clear evidence of its ideological content. "We are facing a genuinely non-western development approach, which considers non economic goals more important than economic ones".<sup>50</sup> Among the main features of that ideology, the importance of environmental preservation is inherited from Buddhist rhetoric. The role of welfare state, through a paternalist approach of political organisation is a prolongation of the feudal organisation that was prevailing in traditional self-sufficient local communities. This ideology works as a legitimisation factor of the monarchy. According to Leo Rose, the main reason explaining why Bhutan does not follow Huntington's model which provides evidences that "the struggle between a pro-status quo traditional elite and a pro-change modernising elite is likely to be fatal to any monarchical system lacking the western European political-cultural background",<sup>51</sup> is the absence of a "strong traditional elite bitterly opposed to programs of change". We propose to add a second factor: the promotion of Gross National Happiness as a cohesive national ideology, which works as a strong support for the regime.

### **Political Patterns**

Political patterns refer to the question of the decision-making process: Who takes the decisions in the Bhutanese political system? What has

been done to enlarge the process in order to imply greater participation of the people? To what extent does this process give indications regarding the general attitude towards modernisation?

The first question deals with the structure, the role and the status of the ruling elite. Traditional elite families, who had a long history of influence in local politics prior to 1907, contributed to the assertion of the monarchy. Family ties, economic possessions, and ancestry lineage have been decisive in drawing the main circles of power around the king. Merit has been equally important in shaping the modern elite. In the absence of political parties, and because the political status of monks has been eroded and the influence of *Chimis* mainly operates in their constituency, only the royal family and the bureaucracy qualify as active members of the ruling elite. Although the king is the centre of the polity, his immediate entourage is less present in everyday politics than it used to be thirty years ago. Some ministers have family links with the monarch, through marriage alliances, but members of the royal family are not given ministerial status "either directly or in slightly disguised forms"<sup>52</sup> as it was the case during the 70's. They have been confined in protocolar, humanitarian or cultural functions.<sup>53</sup> More significantly, the administrative power has been transferred from the Palace Secretariat to the bureaucracy.

The bureaucracy has become both the instrument of the monarchy in the development process and the incubator of the modern elite. It has been opened to a wide range of people from various social and ethnic backgrounds. The promotion through education of common people who can access to ministerial positions, had a double impact: first it provided Bhutan with a high qualified and experienced bureaucracy - while the old elite was mainly socialised in the traditional culture, a growing number of young Bhutanese has been exposed to foreign education<sup>54</sup>- second, it allowed the monarchy to keep control on the elite reproduction system, in order to stay the primary agent of modernisation, and to enlarge its support base. A great attention has been given to the modernisation of the bureaucracy itself<sup>55</sup>: foreign administrators and technicians have been progressively replaced by well trained Bhutanese personnel, new structures have been created,

co-ordination between departments has been improved, lines of responsibility have been defined, ministerial authority has been asserted. The devolution of full executive powers of governance to an elected cabinet, was a logical step in that process. While it is uncommon in most South Asian states, for bureaucrats to be appointed to ministerial positions, what has become a general practice in Bhutan since the 1960's, has been somehow institutionalised in 1998. As stated by the king<sup>56</sup>, candidates for ministerial positions "should be selected from among persons who have held senior government posts at the rank of Secretary to the Royal Government or above". Such a mechanism excludes, at least for the moment, non bureaucrat candidates. Although the merit-based selection theoretically<sup>57</sup> allows a very wide accession to the elite status, the system narrows while in function. Recently, the Royal Government has confirmed its commitment to review, rationalise and strengthen the bureaucracy. Promoting efficiency, transparency, and accountability within the administration, has become a key element for enhancing good governance.<sup>58</sup>

Assuming that consensus politics in a traditional society like Bhutan are largely elite-dominated, the scope of genuine popular participation in the decision-making process was relatively narrow until the 1960's. Because the modern elite system itself was highly centralised, the question of power sharing and participation in the decision-making process had to be addressed. Significant efforts have been made to create institutional mechanisms capable, at least in theory, to enlarge the system of power allocation, and to promote a grass-root participatory polity.

At the national level, although the *Tshogdu* is still far from a western parliament, its powers have been regularly increased, since its creation in 1953. It has gained authority in the legislative sphere that progressively superseded its function as a consultative body<sup>59</sup>. The recent decision to reintroduce the vote of confidence in the king, although symbolical, enhances the authority of the National Assembly as a representative of the people. During the last decade, matters of national importance have been regularly raised by *Chimis* who have specific concerns regarding security matters, and preservation of the Bhutanese heritage. On various occasions, they have expressed views

that differ significantly from those defended by the king and the Royal Government. Debates are open to critics and propositions. Discussions on the annual budget are becoming more and more incisive. While the king still appoints ministers, the National Assembly has been assigned the role not only to approve appointments or removals as it was the case until 1998, but also to elect ministers. The system is yet too recent to know if the National Assembly will gain a real control over the selection, Designation and revocation of top executive officers. However, this parliamentary-like evolution could result in significant changes in Bhutanese politics where personal destinies have been exclusively promoted by the Palace. In the absence of factional alignments or political associations, the emergence of a stable support base within the Assembly for long term programs and policies, is not clear. Moreover, "under the Tshogdu's haphazard electoral system, there is limited continuity of membership, and only a small proportion of the people's representatives in the Assembly have had a lengthy experience in government".<sup>60</sup> For these reasons, representatives of the people are not ready to challenge the bureaucracy's elite position. The *Tshogdu* has not yet become a channel for advancement of the people who dominate the decision-making process.

At the local level, the creation of block (*GYT*) and district (*DYT*) development committees has been a significant institutional innovation.<sup>61</sup> Basically, these elected bodies,<sup>62</sup> that are scattered all around the country, have been created to co-ordinate development activities. Used by their members as forums to articulate local needs and grievance, they fully participate to the legislative process. Points submitted to the National Assembly have first to be ratified by *GYT* and *DYT*, and genuine decentralisation is progressively taking roots. Although considerable efforts have been made to involve local communities in the decision making process, differences existing in Bhutan like in all developing countries, between rural and urban populations, educated and uneducated people, is still one of the major lines dividing the society and polity. The political consciousness of the *Chimis* and the members of the local committees is progressively increasing. Yet, they are essentially interested in local issues. For that reason, conservatism is still dominant among their circles.<sup>63</sup>

### **The Challenges Ahead**

As many changes have already occurred during the past three decades, the Bhutanese polity will be confronted to various challenges relating to the nation, the economy and the people.

#### **The Nation**

As noted in a Vision Statement prepared by the Royal Government: "The main challenge facing the nation as a whole is the maintenance of our identity, sovereignty and security as a nation-state".<sup>64</sup> In that context, the Bhutanese nation is facing two major threats, internal, and external. In both cases communalism tensions are playing a major role.

Although the Northern Bhutanese culture associated with the *Drukpa* tradition prevails, the kingdom is multi-ethnic, multi-religion, and multi-lingual. In such a country, modernisation, which is inseparable from the nation-building process, needs national integration. In order to achieve that goal, which has been described by the *Druk Gyalpo* under the concept of "one people, one nation", unification of political decision is needed in order to create conditions for "modernising the minds of the people" and to lead them "into a post-ethnic consciousness".<sup>65</sup> The major risk comes from ethnic tensions which can contradict the overall process. National integration was generally considered a success in Bhutan where all minorities could enjoy their own culture within the mainstream of the Bhutanese society. During the 1980's, sections of the *Lhotshampa* (Nepali) minority started to consider that integration was detrimental to their identity and that homogenisation resulting from modernisation was leading to the exclusive domination of the *Drukpa* culture. The declaration of *Dzongkha* as the only national language, the termination of the teaching of Nepali in schools, the promulgation of a code of etiquette (*Driglam Namzha*), and the identification of illegal immigrants through census operations were assimilated to a "Bhutanisation" process whose only purpose was to favour the culturally and politically dominant group. This perception has been amplified by the difference existing between *Lhotshampa* and other ethnic communities in term of political consciousness. While politicisation

of the *Drukpa* society has always been very low, people of Nepali origin have been exposed to politics at least from the beginning of the 1950's, when the roots of ethnic dissent in Bhutan can be traced. The creation in 1952 of the Bhutan State Congress (BSC), was the first attempt of the people of Nepali origin to organise themselves. It failed because it was unable to expand its socio-political base to include people from ethnic groups other than Nepalis, and to engender a broad-based support among the Nepali Bhutanese community itself.<sup>66</sup> Yet political developments in Sikkim during the early 1970's, the permanence of Gorkha militancy in the Darjeeling Hills during the early 1980's and political upheavals in Nepal in 1989-90, contributed to a greater politicisation of the people of Nepali origin and to the exacerbation of the crisis that led to the departure of thousands of people from the southern districts of Bhutan to refugee camps in eastern Nepal. Although the problem in Southern Bhutan had been largely mitigated, the presence of a large minority which is the most recognisably disenfranchised under the hereditary monarchy<sup>67</sup> is still a challenge to the political order. Should the Royal Government accept the return of some of the people who currently live in Nepal, there is no guarantee that this population which has been influenced by Nepalese politics during the last decade, will easily reintegrate the Bhutanese "melting-pot". Solution will have to be found to prevent any ethnic confrontation that could be fatal to consensus politics.

Such a threat should be taken seriously as the kingdom is located in a region submitted to potentially disruptive changes. ULFA and Bodos militants who are rebelling against the Indian Government have established their presence in the border areas in the eastern districts. Their presence is a direct threat to Bhutan's sovereignty and security. It has already created serious problems for the commercial activities of the business sector and has been affecting the implementation of development programmes. The concern of the local population led *Chimis* to claim for rapid and concrete solution, during the last session of the National. The king has taken full responsibility for resolving the problem. A dialogue has been initiated with the ULFA, and measures have been taken in order to cut off all supplies to the camps of the militants. Should a peaceful solution not be found, the implications of a military option are uncertain. Some Bhutanese have been reported to

support the unrest. Although limited to fractional elements, such behaviours are disruptive factors in Bhutanese politics.

### **The People**

Because solidarity has always been strong in local communities, social categorisation as applied in the West, was not relevant to describe the traditional rural Bhutanese society. The situation is changing with modernisation. The fault lines found in all developing countries - between rural and urban societies, have and have not, the younger and older generations, men and women - are likely to develop in Bhutan too. Population growth, urbanisation and tertiarization of the economy have brought many changes. Individual behaviours have already been affected. New trends have emerged with either good or negative impact on the overall society. After completing their education abroad, young Bhutanese have seeded a life style steeped in consumerism and western values. Bars and video-shops have been mushrooming in urban areas. Although not yet alarming, the cases of drug abuse and thefts and the crime rate are on the rise. New criminal activities, like the desecration of *Chörten* with the intention of smuggling religious antiques enshrined in them, is a direct challenge to traditional values. The influence of religion has been eroded, especially among the younger generations. Intra-family solidarity is declining between urban and rural communities. In some cases traditional values have adapted quite well to foreign trends, in some other cases they have suffered from modernisation.<sup>68</sup> As noted by a *Chimi* during the 77th session of the National Assembly: "in a town like Thimphu where there is a congregation of all kinds of people, it is difficult to ensure that the *Driglam Namzha* and dress code are observed properly". Although considerable efforts have been done to increase understanding and knowledge of the people on the dress code, it will become more and more difficult in the long run for the younger generation to resist the attraction of western fashion, and for the government to enforce its policy. Due to the inconvenience at work of the traditional dressing, accommodations have already been accepted for certain professions and others are under consideration.<sup>69</sup>

As far as collective behaviours are concerned, the most significant evolution during the past three decades, has been the emergence of a

middle-class, whose growth will have a decisive impact on the traditional society and polity. New social needs have emerged. Although most of them have not yet been translated into political requirements, the time will come when further reforms are needed. In some cases traditional institutions have already started to adapt. The emergence of feminism is a good example. While women have traditionally been vested with the responsibilities of running the households, their political role has always been minor. Things are progressively changing as women are claiming equality with men. Now "in the *zomdus* in the villages and in *geog* meetings, women are the main participants".<sup>70</sup> They have been elected as people's representatives to the National Assembly<sup>71</sup> but there are no women in ministerial positions although boys and girls have equal access to higher education. Among the decisions taken to commemorate the Silver Jubilee anniversary of the king's coronation in June 1999, the introduction of the internet and television has been the most significant in term of adaptation of the traditional society to the modern world. However, a society with a strong oral tradition like Bhutan is very vulnerable to the negative influences of the media, as shown by the debate which has appeared in the country about the risks of external influences diluting the kingdom's cultural heritage and religious values.

Political consciousness is increasing among the average Bhutanese. As observed in other developing countries, the development of concepts like consumer rights which are progressively gaining ground in Bhutan,<sup>72</sup> could lead to further changes through lobbying and political mobilisation. As already noted: "the government has not formally banned political parties, but it is well understood by the Bhutanese elite that the formation of such organisations at this time is still discouraged. The day will probably come when political parties will not only be permitted but will indeed be an essential ingredient in a liberalised, participatory political system".<sup>73</sup> Under the current context the main risk would be to let divisive forces of communalism interfere with that process. The legalisation of ethnic based political movement alone would probably be fatal to the culture of consensus.<sup>74</sup> For that reason, the local polity will have to find fault lines adapted to its nature. The opposition between progressives and conservatives,

which is already existing though it has not generated definitive political tensions, could draw these lines.<sup>75</sup> The major challenge for the regime will be to allow this confrontation to happen in other occasions than the annual session of the National Assembly or the meetings of the local committees in a form that does not contradict consensus politics.

### **The Economy**

Despite the progress already recorded, the Bhutanese economy is still in its infancy. As noted in a government report, "it is not yet fully monetized and the nation's economic structure is still shallow and narrow",<sup>76</sup> with the main impulse coming from the state whose paternalistic approach has been the driving force behind the country's economic development. In that context private sector development is both an economic necessity and a political challenge.

Since the implementation of the Sixth five-year Plan, the Royal Government has declared that "the private sector should play an increasingly important role in fostering economic growth and as a source of employment". Privatisation is already underway and redefining the role of the state is under consideration. As Bhutan moves forward to adapt its economic structure to international competition<sup>77</sup> and promote economic growth and stability through liberalisation of its structures, new actors are joining the scene. Although the private sector is still at an early stage of development and is not yet well organised, entrepreneurs are forming a new category in the society whose role will be decisive in the coming years. The Government has already called for the private sector to take a greater share in the development process. The implementation of that policy will need careful monitoring. While the State will progressively move from a role of "provider" to the status of "enabler" of development, the question of power sharing between government, private sector, and NGOs will become more and more accurate.

As listed by Stefan Priesner,<sup>78</sup> they are obvious contradictions between market economy and Gross National Happiness. First "the current role of the state contradicts a flourishing private sector. Rather than a paternalistic state, which directly interferes in all parts of

development, private sector development calls for retreat of the state to the position of a monitoring agent backed by a transparent legal framework. Second, to promote private business effectively, the government is compelled to restructure its development priorities towards an increased centrality of economic concerns. Third, private sector development requires a reorientation of people's attitudes towards saving, consumption, work, time, and profit from traditional values to the rules of the market. Notwithstanding the state's capacity to correct market failures, these structural pressures will possibly jeopardise the non-economic objectives of Bhutanese development such as cultural and environmental preservation". Fourth, as the rapidly growing educated work force will be derived from the public sector to the private sector, the monopoly of the bureaucracy as the ruling elite will have to be reconsidered.

### **Conclusion**

The Bhutanese polity evolved from a unique historical background of the pre-1907 period. First, it was demonstrated that it was the product of a deeply imprinted sense of cultural identity which had generated the dominating paradigm of "survival and preservation". The tradition of consensus has been described as the mere prolongation of the concept of "unitary dualisms" inherited from Buddhist values, and incarnated by the hereditary monarchy. Second, it was argued that the hereditary monarchy was the major link between Bhutan's past and present. Its capacity to incarnate both tradition and modernity has given it a leading role in the defining of a national ideology, known as "Gross National Happiness" which is both a unique approach to socio-economic development and a legitimisation factor of the current polity. The cultural influence of religion on politics and the leading role of the bureaucracy have been described as decisive and sometimes contradictory factors of the general attitude towards political modernisation. Finally, it was suggested that Bhutan was facing major challenges that needed further adaptation of its polity in order to maintain the pace of "change in continuity".

Bhutan is under a growing pressure both in terms of cultural preservation and socio-economic development. Because containing

negative outside influences is more and more difficult, conciliating tradition and modernity will become even harder. There is a strong feeling in the kingdom that national values will eventually mitigate negative external factors. Even in that case, adjustments will be needed in order to preserve consensus politics. Viewed from a western perspective of political development, Bhutan is at a cross-roads. The king's objective to "promote even greater people's participation in the decision making process" is indeed essential to the viability of the "Bhutanese exception".<sup>79</sup> Apart from decisive institutional reforms which have already been engaged, the implication of the whole society is needed. Because promoting is better than preserving, Bhutan will probably have to reassess the way "national culture" is perceived by young generation and non-Buddhist communities. Enhancing the emphasis on traditional values in the education system and fostering the ancient dialogue between Buddhism and Hinduism will certainly contribute to the dynamisation of "cultural identity" which otherwise might be perceived as a purely rhetoric and restrictive concept. Inventing new consultation mechanisms which are both compatible with consensus politics and the promotion of a grass-root participatory polity will also be useful. The introduction in the Bhutanese polity of non plebiscitary referenda based on people initiative, comparable to the systems existing in Switzerland or Italy could be an interesting perspective for the monarchy to consider.<sup>80</sup> Eventually, assimilating in the ruling elite newly mobilised and potentially politically participant groups coming from the private sector and other non governmental circles, will help Bhutan enlarge the support base of its unique approach to development.

#### ***Dzongkha* Transcription - Transliteration Table and Glossary**

Bhutanese terms are followed by brackets containing their transliterated spelling according to the Wylie System

Chathrim (bca' khrim): Rules and regulations  
Chimi (sPyi mi): Member of the National Assembly (People's representative)  
Chögyal (chos rgyal): the head of the civil structure who is also the protector and the promoter of the dharma, in the Himalayan tradition  
Chöje (Chos-rje): "Lord of Religion". Ancient title used by the heads of noble families.  
Chhösi (chos srid): Dual System of Government (temporal and religious) that prevailed in Bhutan from 1650 to 1907.  
Chörten (mchod rten): Stupa, Buddhist monument  
Dorje Lopon (rDo rje slob dpon): The Second in command in the Drukpa religious hierarchy  
Dragpo tewa (drag-po'i lte-ba): Literally "the centre of violence"  
Dratshang (Grva tshang): State monastic community  
Dratshang Lhentshog (Grva tshang lHen Tshogs): Council of ecclesiastic affairs  
Driglam Namzha (sGrigs lam rnam gzhag): Code of etiquette  
Druk Desi ('Brug sde srid): The "Regent of Drukgyul". The head administrative officer under the Zhabdrung system (1650-1907). Called Deb Raja in most Western-language sources.  
Druk Gyalpo ('Brug rgyal po): The King of Bhutan. Title given to the Wangchuk monarchs since 1907.  
Druk Gyalpo Nadag Rinpoche (Bru rgyal-po mnga'-bdag rin-po-che): The "Precious Master of Power and King of Drukgyul". Ceremonial term referring to the King of Bhutan  
Drukpa ('Brug pa): Followers of the religious school of the Drukpa Kagyu  
Drukpa Kagyu ('Brug pa bka' brgyud): A branch of Tantric Lamaism originated from Naropanchen. The official religion of Bhutan  
Drukgyul ('Brug yul): Literally "Land of the Dragon", name of Bhutan in Bhutanese  
Dzong (rDzong): Fort-monastery  
Dzongkha (rDzong kha): Language of western Bhutan, now the national language  
Dzongkhag (rDzong khag): District (20 districts in Bhutan)  
Dzongkhag Yargay Tschochung (DYT) (rDzong khag yar rgyas tshogs chung): District Development Committee  
Gakid (dga' skyid): Literally "happiness and peace"

Genja (Gan rgya): Contractual document  
Geog (rGed'og): Administrative unit under a district. Block  
Geog Yargay Tschochung (GYT) (rGed'og yar rgyas tshogs chung):  
Block Development Committee  
Gup (rGed po): Elected leader of a block  
Jabmi (rGyab mi): Legal representative  
Je Khenpo (rJe mkhan po): Spiritual head of the Drukpa Kagyu  
religious school  
Kidu (sKyid sdug): Welfare System  
Kudungs (sKu gdung): Sacred relics (mummified remains of a high  
Lama).  
Kuensel: The National Paper of Bhutan: a weekly publication in  
English, Dzongkha and Nepali.  
Lhachhoe Gewa Chu (lHa chos dge ba bcu): Literally "the ten virtues"  
Lhengye Nyamdrel Tshogchung (lHen rgyas nyams grel tshogs  
chung): Co-ordination Committee of the Council of Ministers  
Lhengye Zhungtshog (lHen rgyas gzhung tshogs): Council of  
Ministers  
Lhotshampa (lHo tshams pa): Bhutanese of Nepali origin  
Lhungye Tsok (lHun rgyas tshogs): Old State Council established  
during the 17th century by the Zhabdrung  
Lodoi Tshogde (Blo gro'i tshog sde): Royal Advisory Council  
Lonchen (Blon chen): Prime Minister.  
Lyonpo: Minister  
Machen (Ma chen): The sacred relics of the Zhabdrung Ngawang  
Namgyel  
Michhoe Tsangma Chudug (Mi chos gtsang ma bcu drug): Sixteen  
Act of Social Piety  
Phampa Zhi (Pham pa bzhi): Literally "the Four Renouncements"  
Peljor gongphel (dPal 'byor gong 'phel): Economic development  
Shab (Zhabs): Literally "In Front of the Feet"  
Zhabdrung (Zhabs drung): The spiritual and temporal sovereign of  
Bhutan (1650-1907). The first Zhabdrung, Ngawang Namgyel (1594-  
1651), was a great Lama of the Drukpa Kagyu school who unified  
Bhutan in the mid-17th century under the hegemony of his school and  
gave the country its administrative system. Toward the end of his  
reign, he appointed two of his followers as his chief assistants in the  
religious and civil administration. The first was made Je Khenpo, and

the second was given the title of Druk Desi. This dual system of government was known as chhösi.

Sizhi khordey (Srid-zhil'khor-'das): The samsara and nirvana

Terton (gter ston): Treasure discoverer

Tshogdu (Tshogs 'du): National Assembly of Bhutan

Wang-lung-thri (dBang lung khrid): Ceremonies of empowerment and textual transmission

Zhiwey Zhung yog (Zhi-ba'i gzhung-g.yog): literally "government servants of peace"

Zomdu ('Dzoms 'du): Public meeting. Assembly.

Zhi-drag (Zhi drag): Peace and Violence

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Samuel P. Huntington (1968). *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Yale University Press, , p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> The allegiance to the *Genja* of 1907 has been solemnly reaffirmed by the National Assembly during its 77th session in 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Leo E. Rose (1977). *The Politics of Bhutan*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, p. 147.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Aris (1997). *The Raven Crown: Origins of Buddhist Monarchy in Bhutan*, London: Serindia, p. 98.

<sup>5</sup> Planning Commission, Royal Government of Bhutan (1999). *Bhutan 2020, A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness*, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> After the assassination of the *Lonchen* Jigme Dorji, some members of the National Assembly expressed their concern about the risks of Indian interference in domestic affairs. When the Indian adviser, Nari Rustomji, was transferred by his government to another position in 1966, Bhutan and India mutually agreed that no successor would be appointed.

<sup>7</sup> As mentioned by *Lyonpo* Jigmi Yoezer Thinley, first Chairman of the Council of Ministers, during the 77th session of the National Assembly, the three national objectives are: "strengthening the security and sovereignty of the nation, promoting economic self-reliance through regionally balanced development, and achieving GNH". *Kuensel*, September 18, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Aris (1994). "Conflict and Conciliation in Traditional Bhutan" in *Bhutan: Perspectives on Conflict and Dissent*, Kiscadale: Asia Research Series, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> As noted by M. Aris: "the antonyms of peace and violence are joined in the stock compound term *zhi-drag* ("peace-violence"), which is used in bureaucratic language to refer to the civil and military authorities of Bhutan." (M. Aris, p. 22)

<sup>10</sup> *Zhiwey Zhung yog* "government servants of peace", by opposition to "The Violent", the army which is referred to as *Dragpo tewa*, literally "the center of violence".

<sup>11</sup> Adam Pain and Deki Pema, *Continuing Customs of Negotiation and Contestation in Bhutan*, 16th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, University of Edinburgh, September 2000.

<sup>12</sup> As noted by Leo E. Rose, *ibid.*, p. 184: " There was a de facto division of responsibilities and powers between the King and his small coterie of officials, who exercised the "national" powers - e.g. foreign relations, arbitration between the local elite in case of dispute - and the dominant local families who were broadly autonomous. There was a national tax system and judicial structure, but the local civil and religious elite collected the revenue, little of which ever got to the royal court, and served as the judiciary in the courts. This "live and let live" approach to governance worked quite effectively in maintaining internal peace with the country, in contrast to the incessant strife that had been typical of the *Zhabdrung* system. It was a highly decentralised but reasonably efficient system of governance that began to change with the ascent of the third *Druk Gyalpo* to the throne in 1952".

<sup>13</sup> *GYT* and *DYT* are *Dzongkha* acronyms for *Gewog Yargay Tshochung* and *Dzongkhag Yargay Tshochung*. *DYTs* have been established between 1976 and 1981. *GYT*s were first introduced in 1991, in order to promote further decentralisation.

<sup>14</sup> Although secret ballot has been introduced in the legislative procedure at the National Assembly in 1968, a vote is usually organised only after a general consensus has been reached through a long debate.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Ari, *Conflict and Conciliation in Traditional Bhutan*, *ibid.*, pp. 36-37

<sup>16</sup> Recently, royal pardons have been major acts of consensus politics. The decision of the King to grant pardon to 200 "anti-national" prisoners including Tek Nath Rizal, former Royal Advisory Councillor and prominent figure of the political dissent, on the occasion on the National Day in 1999, can be interpreted as an effort to restore the traditional peace and tranquillity in the southern districts.

<sup>17</sup> Bhabani Sen Gupta (1999). *Bhutan: Towards a Grass-root Participatory Polity*, Delhi: Konark Pub., p.75.

<sup>18</sup> For instance, it is the Sindhu Raja who invited the divine guru Padmashanbhava to Bumthang. What was initially an initiative meant to allow the Raja to get a cure to a fatal illness, gave the way to the first symbolic act of mediation and to the cult of Padmashanbhava who "tends to supplant even the Buddha Shakyamuni as the primary object of reverence" in Bhutan.

<sup>19</sup> The *Zhabdrung's* religious powers have been vested in the *Je Khenpo* who has been presiding over the dratshang since the 18th century.

<sup>20</sup> *Tertön* Pemalingpa (a famous discoverer of sacred texts and treasures), Guru Padmasambhava, *Zhabdrung* Ngawang Namgyel, and Drukpa Kunley (the "holy madman") are the four main heroes of Bhutan.

<sup>21</sup> Leo E. Rose (1994). "The Role of the Monarchy in the Current Ethnic Conflicts in Bhutan", in *Bhutan: Perspectives on Conflict and Dissent*, Kiscadale: Asia Research Series n<sup>o</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> Hartmunt Scharfe (1989). *The State in Indian Tradition*, New York: E.J. Brill.

<sup>23</sup> These symbols are commonly used in the Tibetan tradition, both by masters of religion and secular monarchs.

<sup>24</sup> *Druk Gyalpo Ngadag Rinpoche*, see Michael Aris, *The Raven Crown*, *ibid.*, p. 146.

---

<sup>25</sup> Yeshe Gönpo (Sk. Mahakala), the protector-deity of the *Drukpa* tradition appeared as a raven to the *Zhabdrung* Ngawang Namgyel, and guided him to Bhutan.

<sup>26</sup> *Driglam Namzha* has been influenced by the Dharma teachings. The Vinaya outlines 253 rules for the monks that may be summarised into *Phampa Zhi* (the Four Renuncements). For the laity, it has been condensed in the Ten Virtues (*Lhachhoe Gewa Chu*) and the Sixteen Acts of social Piety (*Michhoe Tsangma Chudug*).

<sup>27</sup> During the 77th session of the National Assembly, the king has been described as the "true manifestation of a Bodhisattava". Kuensel, September 18, 1999.

<sup>28</sup> The *Druk Gyalpo* is a secular monarch. Yet, there is a clear tendency to sacralise him. He is highly revered by the people who consider him as a true bodhisattva. On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the enthronement, the National Assembly, on behalf of the people, offered him the Golden Wheel "which is the symbol of the teachings on the Four Noble Truths by the Buddha in Varanasi, that was used as an object of worship long before the images of the Buddha came to existence" (Kuensel, September 18, 1999). Although confusing for some, this symbolic offering does not mean that the teachings are proceeding from the King.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Aris, *The Raven Crown*, *ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>30</sup> About this mechanism, which was first introduced in 1969, see Thierry Mathou, *Political Reform in Bhutan: Change in a Buddhist Monarchy*, *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXXIX, N°. 4, July/August 1999, p. 625.

<sup>31</sup> Leo E. Rose, *The Politics of Bhutan*, *ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>32</sup> "In 1969, for instance, the government abolished the system under which most monastic institutions had collected rent-in-kind from cultivators of certain prescribed lands, substituting in its place a new system under which monasteries and shrines are directly subsidised by the government". Leo E. Rose, *ibid.*, p. 149. Another symbolic separation between temporal and religious spheres was the decision in the 1950's to transfer the capital to Thimphu, which is the seat of the dratshang only during the winter.

<sup>33</sup> Leo E. Rose, *The Politics of Bhutan*, *ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>34</sup> On his succession to the throne in 1972, the *Druk Gyalpo* Jigme Singye Wangchuck announced publicly that he recognised the authority of the Je Khenpo in the sphere of religion and had no intention of making any competing claims.

<sup>35</sup> The *Dorje Lupon*, who is considered as the Number Two man in the *Drukpa* establishment, is one of the nine representatives of the monk body in the National Assembly.

<sup>36</sup> The land reform deprived the monastic order from part of its possessions. The promotion of a modern school system ended its monopoly over education.

<sup>37</sup> Leo E. Rose, *The Politics of Bhutan*, *ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>38</sup> Leo E. Rose, *The Politics of Bhutan*, *ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>39</sup> *Kuensel*, September 18, 1999.

<sup>40</sup> Like his predecessor Geshe Guduen Rinchen, (1990-1996), Jigme Choedra is a reformer. He took his office in 1996, at the age of 41. Before, he was *Dorje Lupon*.

<sup>41</sup> *Kuensel*, June 12-18, 1999.

<sup>42</sup> In 1996, the sacred relics (*Kudungs*) of the *Zhabdrung* known as *Macchen*, and those of Pemalingpa have been installed in a renovated place in the utse of Punakha dzong, where the relics of Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje, the founder of the *Drukpa* school, are also kept.

<sup>43</sup> Recently, the *dratshang* took a significant decision in limiting the offerings which were made to the clergy during cremation ceremonies, in order to alleviate the pressure on the average family because the cremation was becoming the most expensive filial obligations, sometimes leaving the family in debt.

---

<sup>44</sup> Among these factors the most decisive have been the decolonisation process in South Asia, the creation of the PRC, and the occupation of Tibet by Chinese troops.

<sup>45</sup> *Kuensel*, August 29, 1998.

<sup>46</sup> After intense debate throughout the country, it has been decided in 1999, to postpone the introduction of an income tax. Although it corresponded to a necessity both in fiscal and social terms, that reform was not understood by a majority of the people. Its postponement is a typical example of consensus politics.

<sup>47</sup> Royal Government of Bhutan, *Seventh Five Year Plan, Main Plan Document*, 1991, p. 22.

<sup>48</sup> Stefan Priesner, 'Bhutan's Vision of Development and Its Challenges, in *Gross National Happiness: Discussions Papers*, The Center for Bhutan Studies, Thimphu, July 1999, p. 27.

<sup>49</sup> *Values and Development*, Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley, in *Gross National Happiness*, *ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>50</sup> Stefan Priesner, *ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>51</sup> Leo E. Rose, *The Politics of Bhutan*, *ibid.*, p. 223

<sup>52</sup> Leo E. Rose, *The Politics of Bhutan*, *ibid.*, p. 218

<sup>53</sup> The queens are very involved in raising funds, promoting social development, preserving the cultural heritage, and enhancing the nation's image.

<sup>54</sup> First exclusively in India by the 1950's and the 1960's, then more and more in OECD countries like the UK, the USA, Australia or New Zealand.

<sup>55</sup> The Bhutanese civil service comprise of 13, 845 well-trained civil servants, whose status is regularly improved. Salaries have been significantly increased in 1999 under the command of the king and a pension scheme has been introduced. *Kuensel*, September 1999.

<sup>56</sup> *Kuensel*, August 29, 1998.

<sup>57</sup> A growing number of students sent abroad for higher education - thus qualifying for the top positions in the bureaucracy- come from the new elite families who were first exposed to foreign socialisation. In that respect the emergence of an urban bourgeoisie, will narrow the recruitment basis, so that fewer students coming from non elite families will be allowed in the system, compared to the 1960's and 1970's.

<sup>58</sup> *Enhancing Good Governance*, Royal Government of Bhutan, November 11, 1999. The major recommendations of that report concern the bifurcation of some ministries, the creation of two new agencies - an Employment Agency and an Office of Legal Affairs-, the introduction of a clear hierarchy, the establishment of a career line for civil servants, and the pervasion of corruption.

<sup>59</sup> During the 77th session of the National Assembly, the chairman of the cabinet pointed out that the "main responsibilities of the *Lhengye Zhungtshog* are to implement the national Assembly resolutions, the five-year plans that are updated and revised each year, and uphold general law and order in the country".

<sup>60</sup> Leo E. Rose, *The Politics of Bhutan*, *ibid.*, p. 165. Introduced by eight *Dzongkhag* during the 76th session of the National Assembly, the proposal to extend the tenure of *Gup* and *Chimi* from 3 to 5 years has been rejected by a majority. Among the arguments used by opponents of that reform, it has been argued that capable persons would be re-elected so it was not necessary to increase the tenure. *Kuensel*, September 18, 1999.

<sup>61</sup> Karma Ura, 'Development and Decentralisation' in *Bhutan: Aspects of Culture and Development*, pp. 25-51.

<sup>62</sup> Today there are 572 *DYT*s members in 20 *Dzongkhag* and 2,614 *GYT*s members from 202 *geogs* in the country, elected directly by the people. *Kuensel*, September 18, 1999.

<sup>63</sup> Recently, the most intense debates at the National Assembly focused on the question of *Driglam Namzha*, the national language, and the desecration of *lhakhangs* and *chhortens*. Traditionalists have expressed their concern over the dilution of culture.

<sup>64</sup> *Bhutan 2020, A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness*. Planning Commission, Royal Government of Bhutan, 1999, p. 26.

<sup>65</sup> Joseph C. Mathew, *Ethnic Conflict in Bhutan*, New Delhi: Nirala Pub., 1999, p.22.

<sup>66</sup> The party ceased to exist in the 1960's. See Leo E. Rose, p. 112

<sup>67</sup> D.N.S. Dhakal & Christopher Straw, *Bhutan: A Movement in Exile*, New Delhi, 1994, pp. 133-4

<sup>68</sup> Françoise Pommaret, *Traditional Values, New Trends*, March 17 1998, Wien.

<sup>69</sup> *Kuensel*, September 18, 1999.

<sup>70</sup> *Kuensel*, September 18, 1999.

<sup>71</sup> Currently, there are nine women among the *Chimi*. See *Kuensel*, July 3, 1999.

<sup>72</sup> *Kuensel*, June 19, 1999.

<sup>73</sup> Leo E. Rose, *The Politics of Bhutan*, *ibid.*, p. 115

<sup>74</sup> Since 1989 various political organisations have been created by Nepali Bhutanese in Nepal or in India: People's Forum for Human Rights, Bhutan (PFHRB) in 1989; Bhutan People's Party (BPP) in 1990; Bhutan National Democratic Party (BNDP) in 1992; Druk National Congress (DNC) in 1992.

<sup>75</sup> The assassination of *Lonchen Jigme Palden Dorji* in 1964 was interpreted by some as a historical manifestation of that confrontation. See Mathew Joseph C, *ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>76</sup> *Bhutan 2020*, *ibid.* p. 34.

<sup>77</sup> Bhutan's application to WTO has been introduced in 1999.

<sup>78</sup> *Gross National Happiness: Bhutan's Vision of Development and Its Challenges*, *ibid.*, pp.43-44.

<sup>79</sup> This expression is referring to the highly original, and truly non-western Bhutanese model which can be described as a genuine exception in the mainstream of development approaches.

<sup>80</sup> The idea of introducing new mechanism to promote even greater participation of the people is already under consideration. In May 1999, the Council of Ministers took an interesting initiative. They sat on a panel to be questioned, with no hold barriers, by the public.