

## Bhutan experiments with democracy

By Chris Morris  
BBC News, Thimpu

**The day after its first parliamentary election, the world's newest democracy is already learning that politics can spring a surprise.**

High in the Himalayas, Bhutan has always revelled in its isolation.

That is why a somewhat reluctant electorate was apprehensive about what democracy might bring.

The two political parties ran for power on similar manifestos, utterly loyal to their king.

So the result was rather unexpected: a huge victory for one party - the Bhutan Prosperity Party - winning all but three of the seats in parliament.

But do not expect revolutionary change in this traditional Buddhist kingdom.

The transition to democracy has been deliberately designed to be slow and steady.

Both the new government and the opposition say they are committed to the king's own five-year plan, and to the royal philosophy of Gross National Happiness, or GNH.

But what exactly does GNH mean?

"It means there has to be a better balance between the spiritual and the material," said Karma Tsheetem, the Secretary of the Gross National Happiness Commission.

"Whatever choices we make from now on - whether it's to do with urbanisation or globalisation or the type of economy we develop - we will make sure it is in harmony with our tradition, our culture and the environment."

### Unsettled minority

But GNH or not, some people are not happy.

Tens of thousands of ethnic Nepalese, who used to live in Bhutan, were forced to take refuge in camps in Nepal more than a decade ago. Their status is still in dispute.

We arranged a meeting in Thimpu with an ethnic Nepalese man whose parents are in exile in the camps.

That family connection, he said, makes him a second class citizen in Bhutan.

"So many people have problems with the police clearance," he said, "which is required for things like passports, promotion at work or even opening a small business."

He did not want his name to be used for fear of reprisal.

The Bhutanese authorities deny any discrimination. And in fact, nine ethnic Nepalese have been elected to the new parliament.

But the status of an unsettled minority remains an unresolved problem for the new government.

### Uncharted waters

There is no doubt, however, that the election itself was a success. It was well-organised and peaceful.

Long lines of patient voters in national dress ensured a turn-out of nearly 80%.

But sometimes there was too much control, and not enough choice - a point made by election observers from the European Union.

"We do think that plurality of viewpoints, and giving the voters a genuine choice of alternative ideologies, is important in democracies," said EU observer Holly Ruthrauff.

"And this is one of the things we will highlight to the Bhutanese authorities, something they might want to work on in the future."

Perhaps the next generation will face more choice, as the political system develops.

But many people remain nervous about entering uncharted political waters.

For the moment, the country is already focussing on the next big event in this year of change - the formal coronation of their young king.

It is a reminder - if any were needed - that even in these new democratic times, the monarchy will continue to play the central role in Bhutanese life.

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