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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Bravo, Bhutan

March 27, 2008

Bhutan's voters went to the polls this week and completed the country's decade-long transition to democracy. In a neighborhood beset by autocracies and violence -- Tibet, Nepal, Bangladesh and Burma are all nearby -- this Himalayan nation is a beacon for liberty.

Some 79% of the electorate turned out Monday to elect the National Assembly, equivalent to the lower house of Parliament. Though pre-election polls showed the two major parties in a tight race, the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa won a landslide majority of 44 of 47 seats over its rival, the People's Democratic Party. The vote followed January's ballot for the upper house.

The elections went off without a hitch, despite several small bomb blasts by Maoist rebels last week. European Union observers said the process "generally met international standards," with clean electoral rolls and professionally run polling stations. The high turnout was remarkable given that citizens had to vote in their hometowns, requiring some to trek for days.

The poll is a testament to the foresight of former King Jigme Singye Wangchuk and his son, current King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk -- both of whom traversed the country to make the case for the vote. "Now, whenever we talk about democracy, the things that come to our minds are politics, elections and political parties," the current king said in a speech last year. "But democracy is not about politics alone. Democracy is inherently about values and principles."

Palden Tsering, spokesman for the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa, said that his party's priorities for the next five years are to follow "His Majesty's vision" and make sure "the foundations of a good democratic process have been established." That includes, he says, promoting good governance, equitable and sustainable economic development, and environmental and cultural preservation.

No democracy is perfect, and the Election Commission banned candidates from speaking about issues of national security or citizenship while on the campaign trail -- a nod to historic tensions between ethnic Nepalis and Bhutanese. But Bhutan is still a shining example for how enlightened leadership can promote greater freedoms.

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