



Bhutan decides to experiment with democracy

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Bhutan is the latest nation to experiment with democracy. Theirs is truly an experiment as there has never been anything like it before. This country that sits high up on the Himalayas, right on the roof of the world, has decided it is time to savour this delicacy called democracy that the rest of the world is tearing itself apart for.

And when the king says there will be elections, you know you had better get yourself to the polling station.

A 65-year-old woman made news for trekking 600 kilometres for over two weeks just to cast a vote. She got car sick in her first and only car journey some years ago, and decided that vehicular transport was not for her.

Imagine walking from Mombasa to Nakuru just to cast a vote, mostly through barely penetrable forests and mountain passes in a country where the building of roads is seen as an affront to nature. One wonders how the woman would feel if the person or party she voted for failed to deliver.

However, she was not the only one on such an extravagant journey of hope. Since the powers that be decreed you had to vote in your area of birth, there was a lot of travelling done, and many people saw the election as a chance for family reunions.

Interestingly, the reunions were not always amicable. For many, the elections were an unfamiliar source of animosity for people who have been on a steep learning curve to appreciate the meaning of political parties.

In the interest of harmony, some agreed to split the votes equally among family members. A pragmatic approach in a largely Buddhist society. That was easy, as there are only two parties to choose from. And it certainly makes it easier for people to experiment with something as alien as democracy.

Perhaps they have seen the damage that a proliferation of parties can cause where, upon the collapse of the one-party dictatorship in Kenya, every Njoroge, Atieno and Kibet formed a so-called party, many of which have continued to be pulled and stretched about like a canvas roof at a goat party in the rainy season.

There is little to distinguish the two Bhutanese parties, which suggests there would be little to be gained by having mass mobilisation vehicles for a community that is happy to resolve political differences through simple arithmetic.

Meanwhile, European observers have been heard making grumbling noises to the effect that the two parties are not what they would have preferred to see. They can always come back in five years' time to see how the two parties have fared before prescribing a model that is more in tune with their own multiple-voice sensibilities.

This is a country that has been known to take isolation to the extreme. The third king in the current dynasty, who started the process of modernisation back in the late fifties and early sixties, might have achieved more had he not met an untimely death while receiving treatment in Kenya in 1972.

He is credited with ending feudalism and improving farming practices through simple technology. The path to modernisation has been a slow and measured one.

Radio broadcasts started in the early seventies. The first newspaper began publishing in 1986. Telephones were introduced as recently as 1989. Television has only been around for 10 years; Internet and cable TV for five years.

The idea behind this hermit existence is to keep away foreign influences and unwelcome cultural, political and environmental contamination. But it has not stopped the ruling class from absorbing

foreign influences by studying in the West.

It sounds quaint but rather unrealistic in this day and age to throw a cordon sanitaire around your country because of the fear of foreign influences. That said, it is certainly worth protecting the environment from the sort of degradation that often follows tourism and wanton extractive industrialisation.

Despite the tight controls on day-to-day life, on the media and so forth, Bhutan is in some ways a country ahead of its time. The current ruler, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, says he is committed to replacing the absolute monarchy he inherited with a democratic parliamentary model.

He is a popular man who has endeared himself to the population by his preference for a simple life. He has given Parliament the power to dismiss him.

In Bhutan, they prefer to measure their national wealth not in terms of gross national income but "gross national happiness" where progress encapsulates spirituality, protection of the environment and good governance, among other things. These are interesting lessons for more established yet struggling democracies.

However, in the same way that broad economic statistics fail to capture the realities of the underclass, national happiness figures are just as inadequate. Ethnic minorities have little to smile about.

They complain of discrimination and marginalisation, and being forced to embrace the dominant culture. About 100,000 Nepali-speakers are languishing in refugee camps.

Some of these refugee camps have subsequently become notorious breeding grounds for insurgents. Drug abuse and high unemployment are on the rise, but are taboo topics.

Perhaps with democracy they will now start discussing and doing something about these sources of national "unhappiness".

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