

Bhutan – the Making of a Modern State

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The Kingdom of Bhutan is a late starter in creating a modern state. Despite the late start and limited reference points for state-building, Bhutan is making rapid progress in this endeavor. Bhutan's basis for state-building is limited because - unlike the majority of Asian countries – the country has never colonized. In this process, it merges traditionally Bhutanese elements with elements of modern, western-type political systems.

Today, Bhutan is well advanced in creating modern statehood, despite a late start, the persistence of traditional elements, and the originality of its development path. This paper analyzes the status quo of Bhutan's efforts to create a modern state while trying to preserve traditional elements. The paper makes use of Max Weber's classic triangle of statehood: a given territory, the monopoly of legitimate rule, and a set of institutions providing continuity of the state. On the side, the paper also tries to explore the ratio behind the decision of the Bhutanese elite to embark on such a massive modernization process in a short period of time.

TERRITORY

To constitute a state, its territory has to be clearly defined, and its boundaries unmistakably determined. With the Himalayan peaks in the north towards Tibet, and wide open borders in the southern jungle hills, this was never an easy task for Bhutan. But ever since the country was unified by the *Shabdrung* in 1651, Bhutan's territory is remarkably clearly defined. This is particularly surprising given the nearly permanent civil war and political infighting for most of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Threats to Bhutan's territorial integrity came traditionally from two sides. Independent Tibet in the north posed – despite, or maybe because of, its close cultural links - the greatest danger for Bhutan's sovereignty over the centuries. Even before the usurpation of Tibet, mighty China regarded Bhutan as within the zone of influence, and continued to play this role even more so after extending its borders into Tibet in 1957. Additionally, from the 18th century onwards, British India slowly made inroads towards Bhutan's habitual border in the south of the country.

Challenges from the North: China

The Drukgyel Dzong is only a fourteen kilometers drive from the international airport in the Paro valley. Its impressive ruins still dominate the Paro valley, which provides a relatively easy access to the

Tibetan town of Phari. For centuries, Bhutan oriented itself towards the north, towards Tibet. With close cultural, religious and linguistic links, trade routes led rather to Lhasa over the high Himalaya passes than to the south. Ironically, it was also the permanent threat of invasions which came out of Tibet.¹ Already during the *Shabdrung's* efforts to establish a unified Bhutanese state, Tibet launched a number of invasions into Bhutan, all refuted by the new ruler. Again in the mid-18th century, Tibet tried to invade its southern neighbor, weakened through ongoing internal strife. Only then, Bhutan established diplomatic relations with Tibet, which proved to be a cornerstone in keeping Tibetans aspirations at bay. It is somewhat astonishing that despite the inefficient and fragmented political structure of the Bhutanese theocracy up to 1907, the state proved to be effective in defending its territory over centuries against aggressions from Tibet.

Another northern neighbor, China, claimed Bhutan as its feudatory in 1910, even before it moved closer to Bhutan's borders through its usurpation of Tibet. However, at that time the influence of British India already extended to Bhutan, and India rejected this

¹ Tibetans usually launched their invasion attempts from Phari over the relatively accessible Tremo La pass (5000 m) in Western Bhutan, close to the holy Jhomolhari mountain. These days, this classical route down the Paro river valley constitutes a popular trekking route.

claim successfully. British India based the rebuff on the freshly signed Treaty of Punakha of the same year. This treaty stipulated that Bhutan accepts to be guided by British India in matters of external affairs.² In the Indo-Bhutanese Treaty of 1949, Bhutan re-confirmed India's guidance in external relations, just in time to face the Chinese annexation of Tibet under Indian protection one year later.

It is mostly due to its extreme inaccessibility that Bhutan's 470 kilometer border with Tibet - more precisely with China's Xizang Autonomous Region - is ambiguous. Bhutan does not have diplomatic relations with the People's Republic. However, interaction between China and Bhutan have intensified over the last decades, although ironically mostly through border demarcation talks. In 1984, the Government initiated annual direct talks with China on the border question. These boundary talks have been held on a regular basis alternately in the two capitals Thimphu and Beijing.

During the 11th talk held in Beijing in 1997, China proposed to exchange an area of 495 sq km in the northern valleys of Pasamlung and Jakarlung of central Bhutan for an area of 269 sq km in the North-West (Sinchulumpa, Dramana and Shakhtoe).³ At the bilateral talks in Beijing in 1998, China and Bhutan signed the "Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility in Bhutan-China Border Areas". The two countries agreed to maintain peace and tranquility in their border areas pending a final settlement of the disputed boundaries. The delegations agreed to maintain the status quo on the boundary as before March 1959.⁴

In its session in 2002, the National Assembly expressed concerns about encroachment by herdsmen from Tibet and from Indian Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh into valuable Bhutanese pasture land. Tibetans reportedly graze their yak across the border, destroy border pillars, and loot valuable hardwood

² Gupta 1999, 292f.

³ India's Security Alliance with Bhutan, in: Kathmandu Post, 17.07.1997.

⁴ Parmanand 2002

timber.⁵ Pressure increases from the National Assembly to speed up border demarcation talks with China.

Overall, despite some success, substantial results of Bhutan's bilateral border talks were rare. Nearly two decades of annual bilateral negotiations did not achieve much to resolve the demarcation question. Generally, the discussions frequently result in mere mutual assurances of friendship between the two countries. Although Bhutan seems genuinely interested in a permanent solution with its large northern neighbor, China appears reluctant. While the demarcation issue is of some concern for small Bhutan, China gives it little priority. Observers speculate that - in addition to China giving low priority to these pending issues - China uses the border question to negotiate Bhutan into establishing diplomatic relations with China to counter-balance India's influence in the country.⁶

Challenges from the South: India

In the 18th and 19th century pressure mounted from the south. The British East India Company was highly interested in an alternative trade route to Tibet, and irritated with the frequent Bhutanese incursions into Company-controlled territory. Especially the territory of the *Duars* - gateways in the southern hills of Bhutan - became disputed among Bhutan and colonial British India. In 1772 and 1773, a British expeditionary force invaded Bhutan, and terminated the Bhutanese garrison in Cooch Behari. Consequently, Bhutan had to agree to return to pre-1730 boundaries in the Treaty of Peace in 1774. Shortly after, the East India Company turned over to Bhutan control over the ill-defined Bengal Duars in 1784. In 1841, the Company re-gained control over parts of the Bengal Duars, and formally and forcefully annexed the former Bhutan-controlled Assam Duars. After the Duar War (1884-1865), British India annexed Kalimpong in today's northern India and an area of 32 square miles called Diwangiri in the Treaty of Sinchula. Diwangiri, however,

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

was given back after India's independence under the India-Bhutan Treaty of Friendship in 1949, and renamed Deothang.⁷

Negotiations between the two neighbors from 1973 to 1984 led to a common understanding, and a detailed delineation and border demarcation was established. Only a small area between Sarbhang and Geylegphug and the eastern frontier with Arunachal Pradesh appears to remain disputed.

Overall, Bhutan's core territory is consolidated today, and internationally undisputed to a large extent. Bhutan proved surprisingly successful in establishing its borderlines, and successful in safeguarding its territory in the face of two mighty - and sporadically expansionist - neighbors. However, in the 1990s, a major security threat emerged from *within* Bhutan's borders.

Challenges from within: Assam Rebels

Bhutan's southern border with the Indian states of Sikkim, West Bengal, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh are covered by a lush jungle. The more than 600 kilometer long boundary is difficult to control, and remains largely unguarded. This geographic particularity proved a major problem detecting Indian guerilla groups which infiltrated Bhutan in the early 1990s, seeking protection from the Indian army, and in search of a more secure base for its operations. After a major crackdown by the Indian army, the United Liberation Front for Assam - in short ULFA - began to set up a number of training camps and sanctuaries in the Samdrup Jongkhar valley in southeastern Bhutan. Subsequently, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), and much later with the Kamtapuri Liberation Organisation (KLO), followed this example. Both the ULFA and NDFB are fighting for an independent Assam, while the KLO demand an independent Kamtapuri state right in the area separating Northeastern India from the rest of the

⁷ Joseph 1999, p.43.

country.⁸ The KLO seems to receive support from the two other groups, and set up seven to nine training camps and safe havens in the Bhutanese forests. Although difficult to assess, reports estimated the fluctuating number of ULFA fighters in Bhutan between 450 and 4000, and the number of Bodo militants at 1000. Legally, Bhutan is required to "surrender any Indian subjects (...) who may take refuge in the territory under the jurisdiction of the Government of Bhutan"⁹. This clausal in Article 8 of the Indo-Bhutanese Treaty of 1949 - which also describes an arbitration process in case of a dispute - was, however, never applied to the question of the Assam and Bengal rebels.

Initially, the Bhutanese government did not react to this new security threat. Once the intrusion started hampering local development in the south, the king personally took on the responsibility for solving this thorny problem, but initially with little success. The situation worsened when the guerillas started to attack Bhutanese citizens sporadically, which in turn led to a partial halt of development activities in the affected regions. The Government initiated a round of talks with the Assam rebels, but again with little success. In November 2000, the Bhutanese National Assembly endorsed the use of force against the insurgents. During the same year, Bhutan deployed 3000 to 4000 soldiers in the border areas.

With a small and inexperienced army, the government tried for over a decade to avoid an armed conflict with the rebel groups. It feared that an outright war with the rebels might lead to considerable destabilization in the whole country, and threaten the good relations with the population in neighboring Assam. The Bhutanese government remained equally reluctant to rely on the support of Indian troops on its own territory. Although a number of offers came from India proposing a joint military action to

⁸ The KLO represents an ethnic community, the *Rajbanshi*, and demands a separate state comprising the regions of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, and West and East Dinajpur.

⁹ The Treaty between India and Bhutan is, e.g., available in Parmanand 1992, pp. 222-224.

flush out the guerillas, Bhutan never accepted these proposals in the 1990s.¹⁰

In 2003, pressure on the Government to solve the problem mounted from two sides: from its closest bilateral partner, India, and from the king's plan to draft the first constitution for the country. India – as the largest donor of Bhutan and its single access route over land – stepped up diplomatic pressure on Bhutan to solve the rebel problem.¹¹ In 2003, India hold back a significant amount of aid contributions to Bhutan's ninth development plan. Furthermore, the Government seemed determined to endorse its first ever constitution only after having resolved the problem of control over its territory.

From early 2003 onwards, Bhutan stepped up efforts to draft and train a militia to strengthen the army's manpower. In the national media, a mobilization campaign was started for protecting the country against the intruding militants. Bhutan – under pressure from India and to progress with its own constitutional development, increasingly considered the use of force to find a permanent solution for the rebel problem in the south.

In mid-December 2003, the Bhutanese army – under direct leadership of the King – mounted a successful surprise attack on the militants' camps in the border area. The military action proved the first use of modern armed forces in Bhutan. The force of the military action seems to have taken

¹⁰ The Indian press, however, reported at least one incidence where Thimphu allowed Indian troops to conduct operations for a limited period with the help of local counterparts within Bhutan in 2002 (Bhutan's dilemma, in: *The Statesman*, 15.08.2002). Furthermore, the ULFA stated repeatedly in late 2002 that their bases in the border area have come under attack by Assam police commandos. This claim was denied by Assam police officials, and attributed to in-fighting within the ULFA (Rebel bases in Bhutan "under attack", *BBC News*, 07.09.2002).

¹¹ Pressure was - above all - coming from the governments of the adjacent Indian state. The chief minister of northeastern Assam, Tarun Gogoi, e.g., pronounced in early 2002 that the central government in Delhi was not putting enough pressure on Bhutan to close down the guerilla camps (Chaudhur 2002).

the rebels by surprise, and proved well-planned and executed. It appears that the rebels have not anticipated that the Bhutanese army would indeed resolve to force in order to flush out the militants. Once the determination of the Bhutanese forces became clear to the militants, they resolved both to appeals to the King to stop action against them on grounds of long-standing friendship, and later to threats against the interests of Bhutan. The amount of the involvement of Indian forces seems unclear. Officially, India supported the operation with helicopters for surveillance and with medical support. Other reports claim the involvement of Indian Special Forces in the operation. Although too early for a final assessment of the struggle, it appears that Bhutan has – more than a decade after the intrusions – regained control over its southern territories.

POWER

A monopoly of physical use of power in its territory constitutes the second element of modern statehood. Evidently, power can never be total or absolute, and a number of states fail to exercise complete power in their territory, either because they do not want to (in the case of strongly decentralized states), or because they can not. Therefore, a more pragmatic indication whether a territory constitutes a sovereign state is a general international agreement that it does, expressed in a membership in the United Nations.

From the reinvention of the Bhutanese state as a hereditary monarchy in 1907 until the 1960s, the emerging political elite accumulated and centralized power successfully. This preparatory phase was followed by an expansion of political power throughout the country from the 1960s onwards. It was fueled by and in turn leading to rapid development in the country. Since centralized power marks the naissance of modern statehood, the 1960s can be seen as the birth of modern statehood in Bhutan. For securing extensive political power, two major tools proved to be essential: First, a highly successful foreign policy established a maximum of independence both external

threats, namely from India and China. Second, the slow crafting of a strong national secular ideology provided the power-base against internal threats.

External factors: Independence through a Successful Foreign Policy

Geopolitically, Bhutan's foreign policy's opportunities are limited. Safeguarding independence against the two giants India and China was and is the primary concern of foreign policy.

Ironically, Bhutan has always perceived China to be the greater threat to independence, despite the formerly close cultural links with Chinese Tibet. The subtle, but persistent claim of Communist China that Bhutan is part of a greater China led Bhutan to completely cut its ties with Tibet. There are no roads and only illegal cross-border trading across the Himalayan passes. On the diplomatic level, relations are loose but cordial. Bilateral talks with China over border demarcations provide the only avenue for closer diplomatic contacts. It was only in 1998 that China reassured Bhutan's international status in an agreement in 1998. As part of the border demarcation talks, China reiterated its position to "fully respect the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bhutan".

As a safeguard against China's influence, Bhutan continuously turns to British India – and later to independent India – for diplomatic and military protection. This is partially also due to the easier access to India through the deep Himalaya valleys, rather than across the high passes in the North. However, Bhutan was and is very much aware that because of these close links, India might pose a threat to independence as well. While the Treaty of Sinchula in 1865 stipulated British supremacy, Bhutan managed to preserve autonomy in internal affairs. Bhutan formed the Inner Ring of Lord Curzon's Ring-Fence system along with Nepal, Sikkim and the North-East Frontier Agency. Dependencies deepened through the Treaty of Punakha in 1910, when Bhutan accepted to be guided

in External Affairs by British India.¹² The treaty was the final step in making Bhutan a British protectorate. However, the country was again promised "no interference in the internal administration"¹³. Bhutan relied on its mighty southern neighbor for funding its skeleton administration and the Royal court.¹⁴

When India's independence dawned, the British government decided to treat Bhutan as a sovereign entity. This decision proved paramount for the future of Bhutan, since it could not be considered Indian Territory after becoming independent in 1947. The termination of British rule in India was seen as a reason to clarify the relation between India and Bhutan. The subsequent Indo-Bhutanese Treaty from 1949 confirmed India's guiding role in external affairs. Article 2 confirms that "the Government of Bhutan agrees to be guided by the advice of the Government of India in regard to its external relations". India, in turn, promised to "exercise no interference in the internal administration of Bhutan". Furthermore, the treaty confirmed the free trade and commerce between the two countries, already laid down already in similar words in the Treaty of Sinchula in 1865.¹⁵ Similarly, Bhutan was to freely import arms, ammunition, but also machinery required by the kingdom, although only with Indian approval. The annual allowance system was not only sanctioned, but the amount increased to 500,000 Rupees.¹⁶

The groundwork for *de facto* sovereign Bhutan was laid soon after in the 1950s. The Bhutanese king visited India three times. Subsequently, Foreign Secretary R.K. Nehru returned the visit in 1955, and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi called on the Bhutanese king in 1958.¹⁷ While the Indo-Bhutanese Treaty of 1949 didn't include a reference to India's defense responsibilities of Bhutan in case of

¹² Gupta, 292 f.

¹³ Parmanand 1998, 218.

¹⁴ In the treaty, an annual allowance of 100,000 Rupees was set aside for Bhutan (Sinha 1991, 145);

¹⁵ quoted in: Parmanand 1998, 222.

¹⁶ Sinha 1991, p.145.

¹⁷ Gupta 1999, 293.

aggression, this assurance came now. Indian Prime Minister Nehru declared that aggression against Bhutan would be taken as directed towards India itself. This statement was taken seriously by the Indian administration. The Ministry of Defense drew up plans for air force operations and made provisions for a rapid deployment of helicopter-borne troops to Bhutan in case of a Chinese invasion.¹⁸

The protective role of India intensified during the Sino-Indian border clashes in 1962. The conflict "made it strategically inevitable for India to have closer ties with Bhutan"¹⁹ as a buffer state. The reciprocal relationship between the unequal neighbors identified. After a consensus seemed to have been reached in Delhi about Bhutan's sovereignty, Bhutan was an indispensable puffer against China in its Extended Frontier Theory. As a result of this mutually beneficial understanding, the Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT) was set up in 1965, with permanent bases in the district capitals of Haa, Thimphu, Tashigang and Wangdiphodrang. Apart from training the small Bhutanese army, IMTRAT – headed by a general – served as an outpost of the Indian army towards Chinese Tibet.

But India's renewed interest in its northern neighbor also raised suspicions in Bhutan about India's long-term military presence. Bhutanese wariness of India's intentions soared when Sikkim was merged with India between 1973 and 1975. However, there is no evidence that India at any point considered a similar fait for Bhutan. But the annexation demonstrated India's increasing readiness to annex small neighbor countries after the Indo-China War.

Nonetheless, India remained truthful to its promises, and adopted a strategy of peaceful control rather than of military aggression. The practical outcome of India's strategy was a policy to secure influence through substantive development aid. Bhutan's first two Five Year Plans were

entirely financed by India, and were only gradually lowered over the next decades. The Bhutanese government kept its side of the deal as well. The second and third king slowly won India's confidence by getting approval for each major change in the country.²⁰ The most important prove that Bhutan's gradual strategy towards India paid off was the gradually changing interpretation of India's influence over Bhutan's foreign policy. The ambiguous formulation of India's guiding role in foreign policy was elucidated through facts. Both parties to the treaty adopted the interpretation that – although India was allowed to advise the kingdom in matters of foreign affairs - the ultimate decision was *de facto* handed back to the Bhutanese government. These changes became evident when the People's Republic of China showed renewed interest in demarcation talks with Bhutan in the late 1970ies. At that time, Foreign Minister Lyonpo Dawa Tsering informed the National Assembly in 1981 about the start of direct and bilateral talks with China.²¹ India's concurred with this process, and played no role in the subsequent annual bi-lateral talks.

Once India's diminished role was agreed upon, the Bhutanese government initiated the next step: to obtain recognition as a sovereign and independent state on the international stage. Bhutan firmly believed that "Tibet could not have been occupied by China had it been a member of the UN".²² With the support of Nehru, Bhutan applied successfully for full membership in the United Nations in 1971²³. Membership in a number of other multilateral organizations followed, among them in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The establishment of a United

²⁰ Gregson 2000, 363.

²¹ Parmanand 1992, 173.

²² Misra/Misra 1996, 280.

²³ When the Bhutanese Government applied for membership in the United Nations, it acted in the belief that a full membership required a population size of above one million. Therefore, the United Nations Statistical Office continued to project the total population size, and it stands now at 2.3 million, much higher than the official national statistics of just below 700.000.

¹⁸ The Library of Congress, Country Study Bhutan, 1991, <http://www.lupinfo.com/country-guide-study/bhutan/bhutan82.html>

¹⁹ Joseph 1999, 89.

Nations office in 1974 and a Liaison Office of Denmark cemented Bhutan's claim as a sovereign nation. The establishment of diplomatic relations with the UN and Denmark marked also the beginning of international aid for Bhutan, which in turn slowly decreased the fiscal dependency from India.

An unlikely challenge to Bhutan's sovereignty came from financial institutions in the 1970s and 1980s, when the country reportedly came under strong pressure to take out large loans.²⁴ However, Bhutan resisted the external and internal pressure by government officials, who saw an easy way to rapidly boost the socio-economic development. Bhutan chose deliberately a prudent policy, being fully aware that this might – in the long run – increase the country's dependency. This firm decision manifests itself in the choice of its development partners: Bhutan chose small countries like Denmark, the Netherlands, or Kuwait, or small, neutral and far away, like Switzerland and Austria – the better. Otherwise, the government opted for distant countries with little geopolitical or material interest in Bhutan, like Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada.

Some analysts go so far to argue that “the prevailing significance of Western aid for Bhutan is not its volume, but the aid agencies' physical and political presence in Bhutan”.²⁵ This presence alone provides a small, but valuable safeguard of the Kingdom's sovereignty. And due to its strong subsistence base, and a clear vision to where the money should be spent, donor money is a convenient tool for speeding up modernization. Therefore, unlike in most Least Developed Countries, dependency on external funding is trimmed down. Donor leverage in Bhutan is much less dominant than in most Asia and Africa countries.

The only exception is the special relations with India. Despite frictions over the ongoing presence of Assamese and Bengali

²⁴ The present king reported this in an interview with his former school mate, the British journalist Jonathan Gregson (Gregson 2000, 367).

²⁵ Stenek 2002.

rebels on Bhutanese soil described earlier, Bhutanese relations with India remained good at least on a superficial level. Bhutan was, e.g., the first country to support the nuclear test conducted by India in May 1998. The Bhutanese king even wrote a personal congratulatory letter to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.²⁶ On a similar note, friendship with India is quasi an institutionalized annual feature during India's independence day, which is celebrated with multi-page congratulations in the local media, and music festivals on the streets of the capital Thimphu. Official visits between the two countries are frequently accompanied by already ritual mutual assurances of the continuous special friendship.

Internal Factors: Crafting a State Ideology

With the opening up of the Bhutanese society, it became crucial for the emerging political elite to craft a secular state ideology. The eroding influence of the religious orders – ironically initiated by the elite itself – made it necessary to look for a suitable substitution. Together with a slow but steady politization of parts of the population, the state required a stronger secular basis as a reference point for nation-state building. Furthermore, the first steps of integration into the international community compelled the government to create a number of state symbols which were previously not necessary.

Fortunately for Bhutan, the development of a coherent genuine Bhutanese ideology could rely on strong historical references. In South Asia, Bhutan stands out with a highly distinct culture and religion. However, efforts to develop an apt ideology had to overcome two major obstacles:

First, for a distinctive Bhutanese culture to consolidate, it had to be clearly delineated from its culturally and linguistically closest relative, Tibet. Already the founder of Bhutan in the 17th century, the *Shabdrug*, realized that the newly unified state needs

²⁶ Chaudhuri 2002.

to differentiate itself from Tibet. He had both the authority and the knowledge to devise new customs, traditions and ceremonies in a deliberate effort to develop a unique cultural identity for the country. The national dress – the *gho* and the *kira* – and the major annual festivals, the *Tsechus*, date back to the *Shabdrug's* initiative. Somehow fortunate for succeeding nation builders, the invasion of Tibet by China led to a subsequent erosion of Tibetan culture over the decades. The ensuing complete closing of borders with Tibet cut off trade and across-the-border communication, and helped to set Bhutanese cultures, languages and traditions apart from their close Tibetan neighbors.

The second major hindrance for Bhutanese nation-building is, maybe somehow surprising, the lack of a strong colonial history. At first glance, this would appear an advantage for nation-state building. However, repeated and institutionalized references to a successful struggle for independence from the colonial power are generally a highly useful tool for nation-building. In the few cases of states which were never colonized, it is more difficult for the political elite to mold it into a legitimizing history as the foundation of its new, post-colonial ideological framework. In other words: There was no evident and easily identifiable “out-group” in Bhutan to help shaping the identity of the “in-group”, the newly independent nation of Bhutan.

Despite these limitations, however, the new elite embarked on rapidly crafting a state ideology on a number of different fronts since the 1960s. The sixth Five Year Plan (1987 – 1992) gave these efforts a name: “One Nation, One People”. Improved internal communication enhanced avenues to proliferate the new secular ideology. Communication with the outside world shaped a distinctive and largely positive image of the Bhutanese state abroad. The monk body was marginalized, but integrated into supporting the new secular order. A national language was codified and taught in schools, and state symbols created both as an image for the outside world and as rallying points for politization.

Internal Communication: Roads, Postal Services and Telephones

It was due to the extremely poor communication infrastructure in the country that nationalist sentiments were limited to the small urban ruling elite till the 1960ies. Only then, communication improved drastically all over the country. Initially the government started building a skeleton road network with Indian funding. The first road linked the expanding capital Thimphu to the Indian border town of Jagao, a highly symbolic move indicating Bhutan's turning towards the south rather than Tibet. Work started in January 1960, involved up to 10.000 people working on it at the same time, and was finished in a record time of 15 months. Two more roads to India followed, one through Gelephu in central Bhutan, and one through Samdrup Jongkhar in the east of the country. All three roads link up with the so-called East-West Highway, stretching over 500 km from the western town of Paro to Tashigang in the East. Subsequently, a number of feeder roads were constructed over the next decades, supplementing this basic transportation network. The Royal Government Transport Service, transporting both people and goods, started operating as early as 1962.²⁷ All provincial capitals – with the mere exception of Gaza – are now connected to the road grid. In 1999, the transportation network consists of about 3700 km of roads, out of which 60 percent are black topped. Also in 1962, a regular postal service was established, followed by a short-wave radio station in 1991, and by a regular TV program in 1988. No doubt, there were other interests pushing the construction of roads or postal services, like the Indian objective to move armies around, or the planned economic development of the country. However, the communication network provided the essential basis for a successful fostering of national sentiment.

External Communication: The Last Shangri-La

Communication with the outside world works in two ways. Bhutan did exceptionally

²⁷ Parmanand 1990,33.

well in re-inventing itself as the last *Shangri La*²⁸. The image of a secluded, magical country in the deep Himalayas in turn re-enforces the way Bhutanese look at themselves.

This positive self-image of a special, unique country is constantly renewed by the majority of Bhutanese in the country and abroad. Despite growing Bhutanese communities abroad, most young foreign educated Bhutanese prefer to return to Bhutan despite increasingly limited employment opportunities and in comparison low salary level. Traditional mass media and internet discussion groups serve as forum to express a highly positive – and sometimes uncritical – picture of Bhutan.

This positive image to the outside world was, however, damaged by the conflict with Southern Bhutanese during the late 1980s and 1990s. International media coverage of Bhutan in the last decade focused extensively on the refugee question. It is frequently pointed out in the media and by Human Rights organizations that Bhutan has arguably more refugees per head than any other country in the world. Condemnations by international bodies like the European Union sparked more bad press. And the government's attitude to remain mostly silent on this issue did not help either. However, the negative image on the political scene over the last decade or so did only partially damage the image of *Shangri La*.

State Symbols

In order to create a mass public culture, national symbols play a dominant role, especially at the beginning of this process. They serve as a visible expression of a common identity, and a rallying point at celebrations. In Bhutan, there is no evidence

²⁸ The Tibetan term stands for a magical valley in the Himalayas where time stands still, and people are not aging. Shangri la became a synonym for paradise when the author James Hilton popularized the name in his book "Lost Horizon" from the 1930ies. Despite the claims of both Nepal and China to host the "real" Shangri La, Bhutan successfully sells this image of pristine nature and mystic culture on the international stage.

that the creation of state symbols was an intended exercise. When international contacts intensified, the country found itself suddenly in a position to be in need of an assembly of traditional insignia of statehood.

The initial creation of both the national flag and the anthem dates back to the late 1940s and early 1950s. The origins of the national flag are somewhat clouded. One version claims that the first national flag was created for the Indo-Bhutan Treaty in 1949 at the initiative of the second king. However, the recently deceased Queen mother of Bhutan recently stated that the flag was prepared already for the first Asian Conference in 1947, and designed by Mayeum Choying Wangmo Dorji.²⁹ The same flag was reportedly used to decorate a visit by the third king to eastern Bhutan in 1956. In the late 1960s, the flag was re-designed in its current form to greet the visiting Indian Political Officer for Bhutan. From then on, a tradition started to host the national flag in front of government offices. Reportedly, the dragon was chosen as a traditional and religious reference to the *yu druk ngoem* (turquoise green dragon). Thereafter, the name "Druk" and the horizontal dragon became widespread symbols of the Bhutanese statehood.³⁰

The national anthem stems from the early 1950s, and was composed by Bhutan's first bandmaster, Aku Tongmi. The text was initially written by the Royal Guest Master. Noticeably, both lyrics and tune use the national anthems of India and England as reference.³¹ It is somewhat peculiar that the copyright for the anthem lies with the Bhutanese national broadcaster, BBS.

Photographs of the Kings and the Chief Abbots can be found even in small, isolated settlements all over the country. This goes to the extent that an outside observer and childhood friend of the current king found himself asking if the King was starting a personal cult.³² However, given the generally humble and unassuming personal

²⁹ Kuensel, 24.08.2002, 1.

³⁰ Kuensel, 17.08.2002, 3.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Gregson 2000.

profile of the current ruler, this is an unlikely assumption. Nevertheless, pictures of the King and the Chief Abbot – quite often together on the photograph – serve as a powerful tool to express the country's identity and the strong identification of its citizens with Bhutan.

Furthermore, the old fortress monasteries, the so-called *Dzongs*, represent the state symbolically in every district capital. Additionally, the impressive architecture of the *Dzongs* links the state power with the old *Shabdrug* traditions on a symbolic level.³³ With the start of decentralization to the geog (block) level in mid-2002, setting up offices for the 202 geog administrations became a priority. Thus, they will become further visible expressions of the power of the state. For private housing, strict requirements have to be met as well to comply with standard Bhutanese architecture. Even modern housing complexes feature the traditional Bhutanese paintings, small wooden windows, and a defined slope of the roof.³⁴

Monk body: Marginalization and Integration

Since the hereditary monarchy was first established in 1907, the Wangchuck dynasty succeeded in subduing the religious institutions and their traditional leaders. One of the reasons to abolish the dual system of power was certainly its ineffectiveness. The identification of the Shabdrug as spiritual and political leader through reincarnation might be theologically sound. But it does not assure a stable system for transferring power over generations. The sixth

³³ During the reign of the *Shabdrug*, a great number of Dzongs and monasteries were erected. Apart from Dzongs in Punakha, Paro, Simtokha, and Trongsa, his rule oversaw the construction of the Dzongs in Jakar, Lhuentse, Transhi Yangtse, Mongar, Trashigang and Zhemgang.

³⁴ The city corporation in the southern town of Phuntsholing was struggling in 2003 to enforce these standards. Flat roofs provide an additional space in the attic space, and would be more useful in the hot climate of the Bhutanese south. However, the city corporation is now insisting that even older structures have to incorporate Bhutanese architectural style (Kuensel, 30.11.2003,6).

Shabdrug, Jigme Dorji, was assassinated by royalist forces in 1931 after seeking help from Mahatma Gandhi in restoring the rightful authority of the Shabdrungs in Bhutan. Later, two subsequent reincarnations in eastern Bhutan disappeared mysteriously. Another claimant, Ngawang Namgyel, was born outside Bhutan, and continued to live there. Interestingly, the Nepal-based Druk National Congress and the breakaway Druk-Yul Democratic Party seem to have been able to instrumentalize the ninth Shabdrug for their purposes.³⁵ The current King of Bhutan – in an effort to reconcile the Wangchuck dynasty with the Shabdrug institution – reportedly visited him in northern India, and asked him to return to Bhutan. However, the Shabdrug refused.

In a significant step, the King banned the traditional collection of rents-in-kind by monasteries in 1968. Instead, the monasteries received an annual grant of 500.000 Ngultrum. As a logical consequence, the Ministry of Finance was authorized to audit the account of the monk bodies. Certainly, this step assured the welfare of the monk body in changing times. But it also extended the secular dominance of the state over the religious institutions, and successfully co-opted the religious orders into the overall state structure. In 1984, the king established Council for Ecclesiastical Affairs (*Dratshang Lhenshog*) to counter-balance the declining influence of the religious orders, but also to enforce the state's control over the monk body.³⁶

Despite the increasing control of the state over the religious bodies, the non-Hindi population continues to show a deep religious attachment to Buddhism. Therefore, the emerging political system can not do without permanent references to the unity between state and church. But the successful marginalization and subsequent integration of the monk body into the political system made it possible to instrumentalize the Bhutanese form of Buddhism to foster nation building.

³⁵ Gregson 2000,35-39.

³⁶ Labh 1996,210.

Nowadays, far from challenging the secular political order in the country, *Drukpa* Buddhism serves as a powerful tool to legitimize the existing power structure.

Language-building

Twenty languages are spoken in today's Bhutan, most of them dialects without a script of their own, and mostly not codified. Although the exact numbers are difficult to assess, the three biggest languages by far are Dzongkha with 160.000 speakers, Nepali with 156.000, and Sharchop with 138.000.³⁷ Dzongkha is mostly spoken in western Bhutan, and spoken as a mother tongue by a minority of less than 20% of the population.³⁸ It derives from classical Tibetan or *Choke*, which was taught and used in the monasteries.³⁹ The Sharchop-speakers live mostly in the east of the country, and are believed to be the earliest inhabitants of Bhutan. Nepali-speakers immigrated into the country to a greater extent since the early 20th century.

When the need for better communication arose in the early 1960s, Dzongkha was selected as the national language of Bhutan. There are several reasons for this choice. First, Dzongkha has always been the language of the educated elite. Second, Dzongkha was developed on the basis of Tibetan *Choke*, which was in the course of centuries amassed a large amount of scholarly work. Thirdly, Dzongkha is spoken – although with a wide variety of dialects – mainly in the western part of the country, the seat of the capital.

A language policy for Bhutan was first introduced in the early 1960s, when modern Dzongkha slowly replaced the archaic and clerical *Choke*. From then onwards, deliberate efforts went into the development of Dzongkha into a codified, living language. A script for Dzongkha was developed over the 1970s. The Dzongkha Division under the Department of Education started in 1971 to prepare reading material for schools,

including text books, a Dzongkha-English dictionary, a Dzongkha dictionary, and grammar books. In 1986, a special Dzongkha Advisory Committee was set up, formulating guidelines to standardize the language. At the same time, the Dzongkha Development Commission was established to push modernization of the language forward.⁴⁰ Despite problems with translation, all laws and decrees are first and foremost published in Dzongkha. Currently, the Commission is pushing to include the Dzongkha alphabet into the computer operating system Microsoft Windows. A crucial role in the standardization of Dzongkha is played by the only national newspaper *Kuensei*, which is also printed in English and Nepali. Formerly a government bulletin, the government-owned corporation now serves as a rallying point for the emerging literature in Dzongkha.⁴¹ Recently, the television channel Bhutan Broadcasting Service enhances this trend through news in Dzongkha and English.

But a standardized language can only go that far without the adequate knowledge how to read and write. Therefore, it was equally important for enhancing communication to increase literacy rates in the country. To achieve that, and to raise the general educational standard, an education system had been built up rapidly. In 1962, Prime Minister Jigme Palden Dorji invited the Jesuit Brothers at St. Joseph's School in Indian Darjeeling to guide Bhutan in developing a primary school system. King Jigme Wangchuk opted for the English medium school system rather than building on the rudimentary Hindi medium system in place at that time. Over time, the borrowed nineteenth century British public school model from India could be adapted into a genuinely Bhutanese educational system suitable for its cultural policy. The high number of Indian teachers is slowly decreasing. Nowadays, English is still the medium of instruction, but students must

³⁷ Chakravarty 1996,62-66.

³⁸ Lindner/Cavin 2003,13.

³⁹ *Dzongkha* is literally the language of the fortress: *Dzong* is the fortress, and *kha* the language.

⁴⁰ Chakravarty 1996,64.

⁴¹ Ibid.

pass Dzongkha in class VI, VII, and XII for promotion to the next class.⁴²

Distilling a State Ideology: Gross National Happiness

Different attempts to craft a state ideology reached a climax when the present King pronounced the catchy concept of "Gross National Happiness" (GNH) as the overarching development philosophy of Bhutan.⁴³ The basic idea behind this concept is that not only material well-being, but the composite satisfaction of material and spiritual well-being should be at the center of development. It is not substituting the traditional Gross National Product as a proxy for development, but complementing it. The main difference between Gross National Happiness and Gross National Product is that the former focuses on the end, and the latter on the means to this end. Over the years, numerous efforts were made to operationalize the concept, but with limited success. In a critical assessment of the concept, Stehlik concludes that "GNH is a wonderfully fresh, yet familiar, paradigm, one which pro-actively deflects attention from the sinking paradigms of the past". But "apart from proclaiming the GNH concept, Bhutan has done too little to fill it with flesh and bones", thus "its core remains elusive, as elusive as happiness itself".⁴⁴ The first international conference on Gross National Happiness in early 2004 drew more than 60 scholars from abroad, but did little to further define GNH further, or to complement it with indicators to gauge progress.

Despite the paucity of real debate on the national doctrine, a four-pronged working definition has emerged. The current official interpretation of GNH relies on four main pillars: 1) economic growth, 2) the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, 3) the preservation and sustainable use of the environment, and 4) good governance. Insofar, it is – despite its

⁴² Sinha 2001, 193-196.

⁴³ Some sources claim that the expression „Gross National Happiness“ was originally formulated by the late Prime Minister of Bhutan, Jigme Palden Dorji.

⁴⁴ Stehlik 2000.

attractive label – not very different from postmodern development concepts like UNDP's concept of Human Development. It also comes as a surprise that the current interpretation of GNH is utterly secular. No direct link is made to the Buddhist belief system, as one would expect in the last Mahayana kingdom. However, despite its shortcomings in interpretations, GNH serves as a crucial rallying point and distinctive label for Bhutan's state ideology, and attracts more and more attention from the emerging field of happiness research abroad.⁴⁵

Challenging State Ideology: The Southern Bhutanese Problem

King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck reportedly stated once that Bhutan is like a bird which can only fly with both wings. The two wings are the ancient religions of Buddhism and Hinduism.⁴⁶ But the multi-religious set-up of Bhutan – and its cultural differences – probably poses the most serious threat to a successful national ideology. Much has been written about the ethnic conflicts in Bhutan over the last two decades. However, a lot remains unclear about what actually triggered the exodus of ten thousands ethnic Nepali from Bhutanese soil.⁴⁷

It remains disputed when exactly large-scale Nepali immigration into southern Bhutan started. Some sources claim that organized immigration started after the Duar Wars in 1864 or even earlier. However, it seems more likely that immigration of larger numbers commenced only in the very early

⁴⁵ For an initial exploration into the linkage between development and happiness see Whitehouse/Winderl 2004.

⁴⁶ Jigme Thinley 1996, 237.

⁴⁷ Interpretations range from government-sponsored ethnic cleansing of Bhutanese with Nepali background to mere voluntary emigration of ethnic Nepali. While pro-Nepali authors and Nepalese activists wrote prolifically about this topic, open historic accounts from the official Bhutanese side are rare. The Bhutanese Government did initially nothing to argue their cause on the international stage, and only recently became more open about the issue of southern Bhutanese. Because pro-Nepali groups launched successful public relations campaigns, reports in the international media tend to reflect their particular interpretation of the events.

20th century. High-level Bhutanese officials point to the year 1900, when the *Penlop* of Tongsa authorized a man named Kazi Ugyen Dorji to recruit Nepalese as contractual labors for the extraction of timber and clearing the sub-tropical forests in the south.⁴⁸ Until the 1950s, recruitments were limited to the area around Samchi and Tsirang in the south-west of the country. With time, a class of contractual landlords emerged, in charge of parceling the cleared land into plots for allotment.⁴⁹ The start of planned development in the 1960s led to the establishment of a network of malaria eradication units. With the treat of the deadly disease greatly diminished, it triggered an influx of Nepali immigration in the 1960s and 1970s, spreading to Sarpang and Gelephu further to the east.

Since the late 1950ies, the Bhutanese government implemented a deliberate integration policy to bring the ethnic Nepali into the national mainstream. As a first step, the National Assembly granted all Nepalese immigrants resident in Bhutan at that time citizenship by registration. The Government started a program to foster national integration, which consisted of six steps: 1) The official introduction of the term *Lhotsampa* – literarily southern people – implies the countries acceptance and recognition of ethnic Nepali as part of a ethnically divers Bhutanese society. 2) Restrictions against the entry and travel of southern Bhutanese, as well as the acquisition of land in Bhutan's interior were lifted in 1975. 3) From 1976 onwards, infrastructure development in the south was accelerated. 4) The introduction of a merit-based civil service in 1982 eliminated discrimination on ethnic grounds. 5) The Bhutanese Army allotted half of its slots for officers training to candidates from the south. 6) Despite political reservations, almost all major industries and commercial centers were established in the south on the basis of purely economic considerations.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Jigme Thinley 1996,220.

⁴⁹ Ibid.,227.

⁵⁰ Jigmi Thinley 1996,232-234.

However, interpretation of government measurements varies widely. The introduction of the term *Lhotsampa* for the people in the south was seen by government-critical writers as an attempt to “create a distinction between the Bhutanese of Nepali origin and the people of Nepali ethnicity in India and Nepal”⁵¹. And the monetary incentives for Drukpa-Nepali inter-ethnic marriages can be interpreted as an effort to “create a new group of people who lack both Drukpa and Nepali identities”. Overall, however, one does get the impression that the government's effort to integrate Nepali residents into mainstream politics was a genuine, integrative attempt rather than a sinister plot to expel non-Drukpas.

Given the government's massive efforts to integrate ethnic Nepalese, what were the reasons for the political elite to abruptly reverse its integration policies? The obvious trigger was certainly the results of the nation-wide census in 1988. But suspicions over illegal immigration must have grown steady within the ruling Drukpa elite over the 1980ies. Internal politics might have played a role, too. Some analysts saw a new alliance after the coup d'etat attempt in 1964 between the king, the monk body, and the newly emerged, conservative *Drukpa* middle class, which “pushed the Nepalis as a group to the fringes of the public sphere”.⁵² And the annexation of neighboring Sikkim in 1975 by India raised anew fear of a similar ethnic take-over in Bhutan. Therefore, the government set up a comprehensive census in order to detect “planned and systematic infiltration by the immigrant Nepalese”⁵³ Deliberately, the government ordered the census to be conducted under direct supervision of the central authorities in order to avoid tampering with the records on the local level.⁵⁴ The confirmation of the extent of this “silent invasion” through various illegal means⁵⁵ shocked the ruling

⁵¹ Joseph 1999,139.

⁵² Ibid.,170.

⁵³ Jigme Thinley 1996,2.

⁵⁴ In the census of 1981, responsibility for the census was discharged mainly to the village headman.

⁵⁵ The current Foreign Minister Jigmi Thinley analyzed nine different strategies of infiltration: 1) entry by

elite profoundly. Allegedly, the census identified about 15,000 Nepali as illegal immigrants after 1958, and 47,235 acres of illegal landholdings in Samchi district.⁵⁶ The elite's perception of a "planned and deliberate nature of infiltration" for the purpose of "achieving demographic changes" led to a subsequent reversal of the integration paradigm.

While the Drupa elite started to perceive Nepalese residents as a dangerous threat to their identity and integrity, the Nepali immigrants sensed discrimination and deprivation in Bhutan.⁵⁷ From their side, various elements in the national census led to increasing discontent. Firstly, the fact that the census was apparently conducted in southern Bhutan with the single goal to identify illegal Nepalese immigrants angered the more politicized ethnic Nepalese. Second, the cut-off year of 1958 for legal immigration didn't take into account alleged evictions of non-nationals during 1986-87 and the Green Belt proposal. Third, the census teams comprised members belonging to non-Nepali areas and from non-Nepali communities.⁵⁸ These developments effectively politicized the Nepali ethnicity. The People's Forum for Human Rights Bhutan (PFHRB) was formed in Nepal in July 1989 and the Bhutan People's Party (BPP) in June 1990 in northern India, in Siliguri. Demonstrations erupted in southern Bhutan in September 2002 in agitation against the Drukpa-dominated political order, and subsequently spread to Tsirang and Gelephu.⁵⁹ At the same time, a "war of political pamphlets" was launched by the BPP, followed by propaganda efforts by the Bhutanese government.

matrimony, 2) entry by reverse adoption, 3) entry by acquisition of land and house, 5) entry by falsification of documents, 6) entry by displacement, 7) entry by resurrection, 8) entry by enrollment in schools, 9) entry by intimidation, bribery and force (Jigme Thinley 1996, 243-245).

⁵⁶ Department of Information: Anti-National Activities in Southern Bhutan: An update on the Terrorist Movement, Thimphu, 12.08.1992, 34.

⁵⁷ Upreti 1996, p.79

⁵⁸ Joseph 1999, 140-141.

⁵⁹ Joseph 1999, 145

The census of 1988 led to action and counter-action, ending in a cycle of intensifying political struggle. The Bhutanese government promulgated the Drukpa code of values and etiquette, the so-called *Driglam Nam Za*, in 1989, and approved the Green Belt proposal in 1990. The *Driglam Nam Za* stipulated that Bhutanese citizens are required to wear the traditional Drukpa dress, the *gho* for men, and the *kira* for woman.⁶⁰ The Green Belt idea built on environmental concerns to check erosion and prevent flooding on the southern border with India. The one kilometer wide belt along the border would have, however, also displaced allegedly 20-30% of the Nepali population.⁶¹ The 1988 census made it also possible to implement the restrictive Citizenship Act from 1985, which includes proficiency in *Dzongka*.

How many people effectively left voluntarily, how many left Bhutan under intense pressure, and how many were in fact forcefully evicted, is still difficult to establish. The fact is that around 100,000 Nepalese ended up in refugee camps in eastern Nepal. The Bhutanese government, however, is also claiming that a great number of people in the refugee camps never set foot on Bhutanese soil.

Whatever the historic truth, the result was a surge in nationalist sentiments on all sides. The traditional co-existence between Drukpas and Nepalese in Bhutan had developed into a political conflict with strong ethnic undercurrents. It not only activated the Nepali ethnicity in Bhutan, but in turn led to a surge in nationalist sentiments all over Bhutan.

King Jigme Sangay Wangchuk took personal responsibility for solving the refugee problem in the early 1990s. Despite intense personal efforts and a highly conciliatory approach – which often contrasted with the abrasive stance of the National Assembly – progress has been extremely slow till today.⁶² Official dialogues to solve the problem started already in mid-1993 on the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 174

⁶¹ Ibid., 138

⁶² Gupta 1999, 63.

sidelines of the seventh SAARC meeting, and continued in the form of a six-member Joint Ministerial Level Committee throughout the 1990s.

The fundamental issue from the very start was an agreement on how to interpret the categorization of the people in the camps. Already in 1993, both Bhutan and Nepal agreed on four categories: 1) bona fide Bhutanese which have been evicted forcefully, 2) Bhutanese who emigrated, 3) non-Bhutanese, and 4) Bhutanese who have committed criminal acts. Only in 2000, both sides agreed to establish a Joint Verification Team, which started interviewing and verifying the inhabitants in the camps in early 2001. Despite slow progress, and continuous disagreements over the verification process, it seemed that the first camp dwellers were bound to arrive in Bhutan in 2004. However, an incident in one of the camps, where the Bhutanese delegation was attacked by inhabitants of the camps, soured the mood considerably. It remains to be seen if the process will go ahead now.

It is doubtful if the fact that Bhutan insisted on a strictly bilateral process to solve the refugee problem helped in the process. UNHCR, which is looking after the refugee camps in Nepal, has repeatedly offered to negotiate a bilateral solution. India's involvement is limited as well. It could be argued that on the basis of the Indian-Bhutanese Treaty of 1949, India should negotiate with Nepal on the future of the Nepali refugees. However, Bhutan continues to insist on a purely bilateral approach. Bhutan's government is also restricted in its moves by an outspoken, conservative National Assembly.

INSTITUTIONS

A clearly defined territory - and legitimate power over it - is not enough for the long-term survival of a state. To guarantee its existence over time, a set of institutions – a *polity* - is the third essential element of a modern state. In the western concept of democracy - which is closely related to the

division of power⁶³ - we can differentiate between three forms of institutions. First, civil and military administrative institutions make the state work. Second, political institutions provide the state with the channels to create a minimum level of consensus. And last, legal institutions ensure a framework of enforceable rules for interaction.

Lacking external influence, Bhutan's process of building diversified institutions began very late. Prior to the accession of the second king in 1952, the political structure of Bhutan was "almost completely undifferentiated and unspecialized"⁶⁴. Executive, legislative and judicial power was absolutely merged in the person of the king. The king drew his power solely from religion. If political development is defined – as Almond and Powell argue – as "the increased differentiation and specialization of political structures and the increased secularization of political culture", then genuine political development started only very late in Bhutan. The undifferentiated power structure in the early days of the Bhutanese monarchy does – in a strict sense - not qualify as a power "system" at all. Only in the 1950s political diversification was initiated, and accelerated under the third king.

But despite increasingly rapid changes in the political environment since the 1960s, many of the current patterns drew initially on the historical structure and process elements of Bhutan's past. In one of the few analyses of Bhutan's emerging political system, Thierry

⁶³ The age of modernity is – apart from the process of industrialization and the ideologies of nationalism and socialism – frequently associated with the historical process of democratization. Democracy, furthermore, is closely linked to the idea of a division of power. The division in two or three blocks of institutions emerged in the constitutional monarchies, serving as a pragmatic way of shaping effective political organizations. Later, the trinity of powers was promoted in certain states of the American Union, such as Virginia and Massachusetts, and the French Revolutionary Assembly declared it a dogma. Since then, the – at least organizational – partition into an executive, legislative, and judicial branch became a *sine qua non* of modern democratic states.

⁶⁴ Labh 1996,207.

Mathou points out five decisive parameters shaping Bhutan's set of institutions. First, the creation of a nation-state is dependent on the definition of a Bhutanese identity, which in turn is closely related to the dominant *Drukpa*⁶⁵ culture. Second, because Bhutan has never been colonized, Bhutan developed a strong culture of national independence, self-reliance and self-organization among local communities. Third, a tradition of consensus-building and non-violent conflict resolutions has dominated private and political life. Fourth, Bhutan has shown a remarkable capability to assimilate foreign influences without greatly harming its own traditions. And last, Bhutan embraces a particular form of a secular, hereditary monarchy, where the king is more of a "ruler by convention" than a classic absolute monarch.⁶⁶

Administrative Institutions: Making the State Work

Administrative institutions – both civil and military - guarantee the continuous functioning of the state. They are tied to the rulers through legitimacy, and social and material incentives.⁶⁷ In many parts of Asia, this administrative set-up of newly independent states was adopted from former colonial structures.⁶⁸ The fact that Bhutan was never colonized bears fundamental consequences for the administrative development in Bhutan. On the one side, Bhutan did not have to overcome colonial bureaucratic structures not suitable for the emerging state. On the other hand, however, there was no imported, modern bureaucratic system to be built upon.

⁶⁵ Drukpas are the followers of the religious school of the Drukpa Kagyu, a branch of Tantric and the state religion of Bhutan.

⁶⁶ Mathou 2000, 229-236.

⁶⁷ It is a persistent myth that politicians make polity and the bureaucracy implements in a technical - that is non-political - way. Bureaucracies are inherently political animals, and form an important part of modern states.

⁶⁸ Bureaucracy is an often overlooked but paramount legacy of European colonialism in the developing world.

To trace the early beginnings of Bhutanese state administration, one has to turn again to the unifier of Bhutan, the *Shabdrug*. In the 1640s, he established a dual system, the so-called *Choesi*, separating the religious from the political administration. The subsequent *Shabdrugs* retained the control over the spiritual aspects of the country, and the position was selected through the mind incarnation. He was supported by the *Je Khempo*, the chief abbot in control of the monastic institutions. The *Desi*, on the other hand, was looking after the political aspects of the country, including foreign policy, and was an elected leader. At the same time, the position of the provincial governors – or *Penlops* - was formalized. The governors of the three provinces Trongsa, Paro, and Dagana formed an initial, rudimentary central government of Bhutan.

In the early 20th century, two factors led to the end of this simple set of institutions. Firstly, the decentralized Shabdrug system continued to be ineffective, provoking ongoing internal strife and violence. Secondly, Bhutan was drawn again into the sphere of British diplomacy. Britain was interested in pacifying its North East frontier and in gaining access to China via Bhutan and Tibet. British representatives in Bhutan singled out the governor of Trongsa, Ugyen Wangchuck, as their most reliable ally. In 1904, Ugyen Wangchuck accompanied Francis Younghusband's invasion force to Tibet, and proved valuable in facilitating a treaty with Tibet. As reward, he was knighted and made "Knight Commander of the Indian Empire".

In 1903, both the spiritual and the temporary leader Bhutan's died. Both powers were vested onto a weak *desi*, who passed away in 1907. That was the year when Governor Ugyen Wangchuck saw the opportunity to end the outdated dual system. With the implicit acceptance and support of the British, he was made hereditary king of Bhutan with the "Oath of Allegiance" in Phunaka.⁶⁹ It was an "oligarchic conclave of the most effective

⁶⁹ A translation of the Oath of Allegiance can be found in Gupta 1999, 56.

Bhutanese functionaries of the time, who had no reservation in accepting Ugyen Wangchuck as their hereditary ruler".⁷⁰ While the Oath did not constitute an "election" in modern terms, support for this radical departure from the dual systems stemmed mostly from the realization of the political elite that a new, more effective system is needed.

The highly decentralized dual system was replaced by a structurally and operationally centralized set of rudimentary institutions with the king at its core. For most peasants, this change made very little difference in a country as remote and inaccessible as Bhutan. But resistance originated among the small regional elite which lost most of its power to the newly established, absolute monarchy. The former *Penlop* of Paro, Dawa Paljor, e.g., never accepted the new authority until his death in 1918.⁷¹ But through a policy of replacing the old local elite with relatives from eastern Bhutan, and through a consecutive marginalization of the monk body, the new ruler succeeded in establishing complete control over the secular administration.

When planned development started in the early 1960s, the Bhutanese state was bare of a diversified bureaucracy. It was small group of people at the Royal court surrounding the king who provided the starting point for a professional administration. Centered and driving by a strong, centralized monarchy, and with the religious orders banned from the inner core of the political institutions, the bureaucracy in Bhutan has seen decades of accelerated diversification and rapid growth since then. Over the last decades, government posts have absorbed nearly all better educated Bhutanese into the system. As of now, there are 13,500 civil servants employed by the government, which amounts to about 2% of the total population.⁷² Although this is at the lower end of the average ratio of 2.6% in developing countries⁷³, it nevertheless

indicates a radical expansion and diversification.

The late 1990s saw the peak of the expansion of bureaucracy. Ever since, the government promotes a small but efficient civil service. In 1999, it published a plan to modernize and re-structure the entire civil service sector, based on the principles of efficiency, transparency and accountability.⁷⁴ In 2002, the Civil Service Rules and Regulations of 1990 were revised to reorganize staffing patterns and the reshuffle of ministries and agencies. The government instituted selection examinations for recruitment of graduates into the civil service.

Despite a respectable administrative manpower, the executive branch is by far dominant. 98% of all government employees work within this branch. The judiciary and the legislative branch employ only 271 respectively 39 people⁷⁵. Until recently, the executive branch also controlled the recruitment of personal into the civil service through the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC). Established in 1981, the RCSC is responsible for formulating and implementing Human Resource policies, and looks after appointments and promotions. Although autonomous in name, it comprised only members of the executive branch. In mid-2003, however, the Royal Civil Service Commission was re-constituted as an autonomous body, and will be controlled by an independent commission appointed by the executive, the legislative and the judiciary branch.

The extension of administrative control to the scattered villages and dotted households in the rugged and inaccessible terrain of Bhutan provided a big challenge. The Bhutanese bureaucracy operates now on a three-tier system. Apart from the national level, the administration is gradually extending to the district and block level.

Below the central level, twenty districts (*Dzongkags*) form the territories marked for

⁷⁰ Sinha 2001,75-76.

⁷¹ Rizal 2002,45-56.

⁷² Kuensel, 26.07.2003,20.

⁷³ Turner/Hulme 1997,87.

⁷⁴ RGoB 1999.

⁷⁵ Kuensel, 26.07.2003,20.

special administrative purposes.⁷⁶ The appointed *Dzongdas* head the district administration, and are under the jurisdiction of the Home Ministry. In 1981, the king kicked off what now appears to be a master plan for political mobilization and devolution of power. District Development Committee (DYT) was formed in every district, linking the central level with the geog level.

On the lowest administrative level, Bhutan is divided into 201 *Gewogs*, blocks or groups of villages. Until very recently, the *Gewog* headman was elected along semi-democratic lines. Heads of households in the *Gewog* elected a *Gup* for a period of three years. This changed in autumn 2002, when *Gups* were directly elected in the first ever universal adult franchise in Bhutan. The functions of the *Gups* range from local activities as the collection of rural taxes and the maintenance of community property to endorsing applications of *Gewog* members to the *Dzongkhag* administration. As a second major step in the king's decentralization policy, the Block Development Committee (GYT) was introduced in 1991 at the *Gewog* level, consisting of elected representatives of the villages.

Similar to the civil administration, military institutions emerged relatively late in Bhutan. For centuries, chieftains maintained private armies. This changed with the Chinese invasion into Tibet in 1950 and 51, when the third king decided to set up a regular military force. India's interests to strengthen its security system in the Himalayan frontier led to substantive support of this endeavor. A substantive Indian Military Advisory and Training Team (IMTRAT) - including a Military Training Academy - was set up with its headquarters in Haa, close to the Tibetan border. The rapid creation of a strong military force was temporarily halted through the army's involvement in the assassination of the first

⁷⁶ In the 1980s, the government experimented with a zonal system during the 5th Five Year plan. However, the division into four administrative zones did not result in a more efficient system, and was discontinued.

prime minister of Bhutan, Jigme Palden Dorji,⁷⁷ and led to a crisis of confidence in a national army. Subsequently, the armed forces were reduced in size from 9000 to less than 5000. In the late 1960s, Bhutan set up a nation-wide militia system. With the intrusion of armed groups into southern Bhutan in the early 1990s, the Royal Bhutanese Army strengthened its ranks again. Currently, there are about 5000 soldiers and 174 officers serving in the army⁷⁸, and about 1.800 in the police force.⁷⁹ Additionally, the Royal Bodyguards protect the members of the royal family.

Political Institutions: Building Consensus

Political institutions serve the purpose of guaranteeing a minimum of internal consensus. This basic consensus of the main social groups is a precondition of every permanent rule. In western-type modern democracies, governments perform political power, parties help accumulate and articulate opinions, and parliaments help express divergent opinions. To a certain degree, pluralistic opinions are allowed, if they stay within – and do not question – the given framework of the political system. Given the absence of political parties in Bhutan, how are political interests bundled, and what are the channels for their representation and expression?

During most of Bhutan's history, there was little need in Bhutan to build consensus, and therefore no need for a diversified, complex set of political institutions. Political opinions were dominated by the *Drukpa* form of Buddhism. The society was structured through feudal hierarchies, and political consciousness was generally very low and limited to small circles.

Initially, this changed very little with the introduction of the monarchy in 1907. During the first half of last century, the king was the paramount political institution. With

⁷⁷ The chief of army, a distant relative of the king, was later found guilty of assassinating the Prime Minister, and subsequently executed. Two high army officers fled to Nepal some months later.

⁷⁸ Kuensel, 19.07.2003,20.

⁷⁹ Joseph 1999,66.

a continuous low level of politization of a large proportion of society, and with a robust traditional respect for hierarchy, dissent was marginal and hardly expressed publicly. Diverging interests within the small political elite – notably around the two grand families of Bhutan, the Wangchucks and Dorjjs – were generally dealt with internally.

This changed in the 1950s. Ever since, Bhutan is in a slow but constant process of devolution of political power. Starting with the introduction of a National Assembly in 1953 and the transfer of power from the Palace Secretary to a professional bureaucracy, Bhutan's political modernization followed an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary pattern with the king as the "primary domestic agent of change"⁸⁰.

The Monarchy

The paramount agents of change in this process were and continue to be the kings of Bhutan. It might be surprising that the modernization of political institutions comes from the monarchs, which inevitably undermine their own absolute power. Both the third and the fourth king showed an extraordinary foresight and responsiveness to the changing times. While substantive change in political systems normally comes from bottom in the form of popular revolutions, institutional changes in Bhutan appear as "top-down evolutions" with the king and the cabinet pushing the public and the parliament.⁸¹

Before 1969, the king had the right to veto any decision in the Assembly. For a short while from 1969 to 1972, the veto was abolished under pressure from the king, and

⁸⁰ Mathou 1999,129.

⁸¹ Despite the increasingly modern orientation of Bhutan's rulers, the Monarchy has also seen political violence over the last century. Prime Minister Jigme Palden Dorji – who was also the brother-in-law of the third king – was assassinated in April 1964 in the southern town of Phuntsholing. At that time, the Prime Minister has been appointed regent while the king was away for medical treatment in Switzerland. One year later, an assassination attempt was made on the king himself at Kyichu monastery in November 1965.

he had to seek a vote of confidence from the Assembly every three years. However, the veto was reinstated after the king passed away. It was only during the 76th session of the National Assembly in 1998, when the current king persuaded the Assembly members vehemently to introduce a vote of confidence in the king with two-third majority, thus re-installing the supremacy of the people's representatives over the monarchy. In such a case, the Crown Prince or the next-in-line would succeed to the Golden Throne.

In the same year when the , the fourth king ceased to be head of Government, and retracted to be formally only the head of state. However, while the cabinet is running the day-to-day affairs of governance, the king remains responsible for protecting the sovereignty of the country. And the king's political power extends much further than the current legal system stipulates. If not *de jure*, their high legitimacy and quasi-religious authority allow them to exert paramount influence in daily politics. Open criticism of the king is still unheard of. Nobody within the elite – and less so among the rural farmers and businessmen – would dare to criticize decisions and orders by the king. But despite the highly ritualized expressions of gratitude for the enlightened leadership of the king, the bureaucracy expresses its reluctance sometimes through sheer inactivity.⁸²

The four wives of the current king were initially part of the political system. They represent the more and more elusive king on many occasions. Nowadays, the Royal family has no ex-officio rights in the administration or the political system.⁸³ However, the Queens and the Crown Prince continue to serve as represent the king at social, political or charitable events, and retain their strong influence and respect in the Bhutanese society.

⁸² When the current king ordered Gewog-based planning for the ninth Plan starting in mid-2003, considerable opposition came from the Home Ministry. This reluctance, however, was never expressed openly.

⁸³ Linder/Cavin 2003,9.

The Cabinet

Initial reasons to expand the very limited set of political posts came with increasing contact with the outside world in the 1960s. When Indian Prime Minister Nehru arrived on a state visit to Bhutan, the Bhutanese government wanted to receive him adequately at the common border. Since the position of a Prime Minister did not exist yet in Bhutan, it had to be invented.

Over the years, a more planned approach to institution-building emerged. In 1968, the National Assembly – on the advice of the king – established a Cabinet with three ministers.⁸⁴ Until recently, the king appointed and removed the ministers, while the Assembly approved the appointments by simple majority. When the king resigned as head of government in 1998, the position of prime minister – abolished after the assassination of the first Prime Minister Jigme Palden Dorji in 1964 – was introduced again. In 2003, ten ministers were elected for the first time by the National Assembly for five years. However, the candidates were short-listed by the king. The pool of potential candidates is also extremely limited: only senior bureaucrats – Secretaries and Ministers – are eligible for the elections. Therefore, the top executive positions can only be obtained through long service within the bureaucracy.⁸⁵

It is a particular feature of the Bhutanese Cabinet that it includes members other than the ministers. The Ministers and their deputies, three representatives of the King in the ministries, the nine Royal Advisory Council members and the Chief Operations Officer of the Royal Bhutan Army form the Bhutanese cabinet. It meets as and when required. Decisions are made on the basis of consensus. The position of the Prime Minister is currently rotated among the Ministers annually, starting with the minister

⁸⁴ Minister of Home Affairs, Minister of Finance and Trade, and the Minister of Commerce and Industry.

⁸⁵ The Planning Commission was from its establishment in 1972 a powerful body, formulating and monitoring national priorities. While the ministries' power grew steadily, the Planning Commission's influence diminished. In 1993, it was incorporated into the Ministry of Finance.

who secured most votes in the elections.⁸⁶ While ministers have the mandate to make decisions within their respective sector, the cabinet meetings are used for better coordination.

The Royal Advisory Council: A Bhutanese Particularity

The history of the Royal Advisory Council goes back to the state council established by the *Shabdrung* in the 17th century. In 1907, it endorsed the creation of the monarch, but disappeared soon after. In 1965, it was re-established as the Royal Advisory Council with nine members: six elected representatives of the people, two representatives of the clergy. The king nominates the chairman of the council. Its members are ex-officio members of both the National Assembly and the Council of Ministers. The Advisory Council advises the king and the ministers, and serves as a coordinating body between the political institutions and the people. Since 1984, the Council officially safeguards the interests of the Kingdom in case of potential harm, and has the power to report directly to the King. If the king himself is the cause for potential harm, the Council reports to the Cabinet and the National Assembly.

The Emerging Parliament

The National Assembly (*Tshogdu Chhenmo*) serves as the uniparliament of Bhutan, and is the highest legislative body in the country. The Assembly was initiated by the third king of Bhutan and inaugurated in 1953 in Punakha. The 150 members of the National Assembly (*Tshogdu*) fall into three categories: 105 *Chimis* represent the people. They are directly elected by the people through secret ballot. 35 are ex-officio government officials, nominated by the king. The central and district monk bodies elect 10 members to the Assembly as their representatives. The National Assembly members are elected for a term of three years. Although a secret ballot system has

⁸⁶ The Bhutanese Prime Minister is therefore not "primus inter pares", but depends of a consensus within the Cabinet.

been introduced already in 1968, decisions have usually been taken through a general consensus.

Generally, the National Assembly is conservative in its perspectives and behavior, matched only by that of the monastic establishment.⁸⁷ This led to numerous conflicts with both the king and the cabinet. In 1991, the King needed all his personal influence to convince the Assembly to lift the freezing of development activities in the south after the southern problem erupted.

But the political system is changing rapidly. In an assessment of the first four years since the King forced executive power upon the Government, Kinley Dorji, editor-in-chief of the national newspaper Kuensel, concluded: "With every special *lhengye chungtsho* sitting, formalities give way to substance, hesitation to confidence. Each session (is) becoming more professional and business-like in its far reaching discussions and decisions. A close observer of the *lhengye chungtsho* would have seen a government grow and mature before the eyes of the nation"⁸⁸

The National Assembly in 2003 showed a number of emerging trends. First, the vigorous debates signify a growing awareness of its members to provide checks and balances to the executive branch. Debates were held with increased aggression, indicating a rapid change of political culture in the highest legislative body of the country, leading one member to the conclusion that this assembly epitomizes "the birth of real politics in Bhutan"⁸⁹. Furthermore, the last few sessions have led to the emergence of canvassing and lobbying before and during the sessions. Especially the new Assembly members were increasingly lobbied by interest groups in the capital, including the offering of gifts and cash. Second, the heightened awareness of the National Assembly members led to a growing rift between the Assembly members and the government. "Minister bashing" and

aggressive questioning of government policies and activities by the Assembly members became frequent. And third, growing public awareness of the Assembly is reflected in a jump in visitor numbers, live broadcasts from the sessions, and vigorous public debates on controversial issues debated in the Assembly sessions.

Decentralizing Power

Initially, it was only the state administration which served as a bridge between the national level and the districts and villages. The Dzondags represented the national bureaucracy at the district level, and the Ministries had their respective representatives at the district and block level. In 1981, however, the king kicked off what now appears to be a master plan for political mobilization and devolution of power. In every district, a District Development Committee (DYT) was formed, linking national level politics to the district level. The DYT is formed by the block headmen in the district, by the elected members of the National Assembly in the district, and by the *Tshogpas*, elected representatives of the blocks to the DYT. As a second major step in the king's decentralization policy, the Block Development Committees (GYT) was introduced in 1991 at the Gewog level, consisting of elected representatives of the villages.

In 2002, local governance received a major thrust by delegating the limited regulatory, administrative and financial powers to the GYTs. They will retain local rural taxes in addition to initially moderate parts of the central budget. The DYT will be directly elected by the communities, and the Dzongdag will be a mere head of administration rather than chairperson of the DYT. But many challenges remain in decentralizing power and increasing local participation in the political process. While the separation of power is clear on the national level, legislative and executive powers are intertwined on the district and local level. Further decentralization might reinforce existing ethnic and linguistic cleavages in the country. However, it seems

⁸⁷ Gupta 1999,61.

⁸⁸ Kuensel, 17.08.2002,2.

⁸⁹ Kuensel, 23.08.2003,20.

that Bhutanese with a Nepali background do not constitute a majority in any of the districts in Bhutan. However, this also means that they are generally underrepresented in political organizations at both the district and national level.⁹⁰

Political Parties and Politicians

Although political parties are not formally forbidden in Bhutan, partisan party politics was not tolerated by the political elite. The National Assembly has no provisions for parties or an opposition bench. Most parties were formed in exile, and linked with to the problem of ethnic Nepali. Without parties, Bhutan's political system had no place for politicians either. Top positions in government, legislation, judiciary, and state enterprises were dominated by bureaucratic elite, and occasionally re-shuffled. Only Secretaries and Ministers were eligible to be elected Minister. Therefore, the only way to a political position was through the bureaucracy.

This is, however, changing with the introduction of direct elections on various levels. The first experiment with universal adult franchise was the nation-wide election of *gups*. Despite low voter turn-out and a preference of voters for incumbents, this experiment was successful. Furthermore, the new constitution will reportedly not only lay out the direction for future policies, but also describe the envisaged electoral system, possibly with a two-party system approach to safeguard against dividing the country along ethnic or religious lines. If current developments continue, Bhutan might well see very soon the emergence of political parties and a new class of politicians outside the state bureaucracy.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Lindner/Cavin 2003,11.

⁹¹ At the moment, though, with a still relatively low level of politization, it is still sometimes difficult to find community leaders. It took, e.g., more than one year to fill the vacant positions for the Thimphu town committee. No qualified and interested candidates could be found (Kuensel, 30.11.2002,3).

Legal Institution: Defining the Rules of the Game

Legal institutions provide a modern state with manifest rules for interaction. Legal institutions produce two elementary types of law: First, the constitutional law governs the state. It provides the basic rules and – more importantly – rules for setting up rules. Second, the law by means of which the state governs.

It was again under the *Shabdrug* in the late 17th century that an early code of laws was established. These laws focused on the relationship between the monasteries and the laymen, included a system of taxes in kind and compulsory labor for the common man. Presently, these laws – amended by each successive king – are codified in the Supreme Law Book (*Thrimshung Chhenmo*), and were enacted by the National Assembly in 1957. Subsequently, the law book has been significantly broadened to meet new demands. While all laws are codified, they are not dispersed widely in written.

The separation of the judiciary branch from the executive branch started off in 1968, when a High Court (*Thrimkong Gongma*) was set up. Three of the judges are nominated by the Government, and one each by the monk body and the Assembly. The most senior judge serves as the Chief Justice, and is appointed by the king. Final appeals can be made to the King, who delegates the investigation to the Royal Advisory Council. On the sub-national level, a chain of 20 district courts with one judge and the *gups* administer justice in the district and villages.

A number of factors still impede the legal institutions. The king still serves as the highest court of appeal through the Royal Advisory Council, a set-up which does not guarantee an independent judicial system.⁹² The entire judicial system was subordinated to the Home Ministry, and is now under the Council of Ministers. There seem to be cases where former judges are reassigned to the civil service, thus blurring the distinction between the branches of government, and

⁹² For examples see Rizal 2002, 134-135

allow for dependencies of the judges.⁹³ Furthermore, Bhutan's legal system does not have lawyers, attorneys, or a jury system. Instead, people versed in law and negotiations – the *jabmis* – represent litigants or defendants. However, major efforts are in place to upgrade the quality of and access to the judicial system. An increasing number of graduates are sent abroad to study modern law. In addition, there are plans to create an Office of Legal Affairs, which later will develop into a Ministry of Law.

Towards a Constitution

Bhutan has not yet a written constitution. However, a number of legal documents mark a pre-constitutional process: the Oath of Alliance which established the Monarchy in 1907, Royal decrees, laws enacted by the National Assembly, and numerous statutes and conventions.

The ongoing drafting of a constitution is the climax of a rapid process of modernization and democratization in the Kingdom. There are many indications that the process which started in 1981 with the first wave of decentralization was a well-planned master plan by the current king. When the only 17 years old Jigme Singye Wangchuk faced the world press for the first time at a press conference in 1972, he emphasized: "We will slowly and gradually develop into a constitutional monarchy." More than thirty years later, a draft constitution is under consideration, the end of a long master plan executed with flexibility, good eye-sight, and determination.

The constitution will also serve as a major instrument in nation-building efforts. If endorsed by a broad majority of its population, it will outline the way political interests are bundled and expressed in the future. It can also be seen as an effective way to integrate the diverse ethnic groups in the country, while cementing the cultural tradition of the dominating political elite. If successful, the drawing process for the constitution can serve as a preemptive

⁹³ Rizal 2002,132-137.

measure to quell potential political dissent. The Government is explicit about the primary need for a constitution for Bhutan: "With the modernization of the country, and globalization, there is greater need to protect the cohesion and sovereignty of the country."⁹⁴

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A MODERN STATE?

So where does Bhutan's effort to create a modern state with a modern nation stand today?

First, if the Bhutanese story is a story of survival⁹⁵, Bhutan has been doing almost unbelievably well. Despite geopolitical threats from its giant neighbors India and China, and despite its small size, Bhutan is firmly on the map as an independent state with a distinct culture.

Second, what strikes is the incredible pace of change, especially among the urbanized Bhutanese. As the editor of the national newspaper states, "Bhutan leaps across the centuries; each new generation grows up in a different world".⁹⁶ Few countries without a colonial tradition and institutions have engaged in such a rapid, but rather successful effort of building a state.

Third, ironically, the non-colonial tradition of Bhutan can be characterized by features of a classic colonial state. Bhutan in the early 21st century nowadays resembles more an administrative unit, a bureaucratic state, where politicians are largely absent or severely restricted in their powers. Typically, the roles of bureaucrats and politicians are amalgamated. Career bureaucrats move up the ladder to the position of the Secretary, from where they can be selected by the king to stand in an election by the National Assembly for a minister post. But this is also the strength of the Bhutanese bureaucracy. It is the pioneering force behind the development and nation-building process.

⁹⁴ RGoB 2001,22.

⁹⁵ Kuensel, 02.11.2002,2.

⁹⁶ Kuensel, 04.10.2003,2.

Fourth, Bhutan has achieved a “remarkably high level of political consolidation”, resulting in “high legitimacy of the political system”.⁹⁷ Despite challenges from the armed insurgents in the South, and despite the refugee problem, few of its citizens are currently willing to challenge the political order. The recent political modernization towards an increasingly democratic and participatory system can indeed be seen as a farsighted preparation for increased politization in the country.

Fifth, a number of internal and external observers have stressed the uniqueness of Bhutan’s system. However, Thierry Matheu’s argument of the overwhelming influence of traditional features – true for some decades of the evolving Bhutanese polity – seems less and less accurate. With the upcoming changes in Bhutan’s political system it is difficult to accept Leo E. Rose’s analysis⁹⁸ that the Bhutanese political system is unique, and difficult to make any meaningful comparison with any other polity. “Political reform, Bhutanese style, is a specially demanding challenge because there is no system to emulate, no similar situation to draw from. Bhutan is creating its own unique system of governance, an initiative which is as bold as it is risky. Political analysts would be hard pushed to identify another similar experiment of this daring and magnitude”⁹⁹

Sixth, despite the strong cultural heritage, historical influences shaping political institutions are reduced considerably. In the early 21st century, a draft constitution in under review, the national Parliament is increasingly flexing its muscles, the classical three branches of government become defined more clearly, and universal adult franchise is becoming the norm on the lower levels of government. Bhutan is well on its way to adapt an institutional set resembling a liberal democracy, where traditional forms of institutions are more and more reduced to symbolic functions.

⁹⁷ Linder/Cavin 2003,8.

⁹⁸ Repeated in Gupta 1999,50.

⁹⁹ Kuensel, 17.08.2002,2.

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