

Polity IV Country Report 2007: Bhutan

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| <table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Score:</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2006</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2007</td> <td style="width: 15%;">Change</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Polity:</td> <td>-6</td> <td>-6</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Democ:</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Autoc:</td> <td>6</td> <td>6</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Durable:</td> <td></td> <td>2</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tentative:</td> <td></td> <td>No</td> <td></td> </tr> </table> | Score: | 2006 | 2007 | Change | Polity: | -6 | -6 | 0 | Democ: | 0 | 0 | 0 | Autoc: | 6 | 6 | 0 | Durable: | | 2 | | Tentative: | | No | | <div style="text-align: center;"> <p>Authority Trends, 1946-2007: Bhutan</p> </div> |
| Score: | 2006 | 2007 | Change | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Polity: | -6 | -6 | 0 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Democ: | 0 | 0 | 0 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Autoc: | 6 | 6 | 0 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Durable: | | 2 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Tentative: | | No | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| SCODE | BHU | CCODE | 760 | Date of Report | 1 November 2008 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Polity IV Component Variables | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| XRREG | XRCOMP | XROPEN | XCONST | PARREG | PARCOMP | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Date of Most Recent Polity Transition (3 or more point change) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| End Date | 25 March 2005 | | Begin Date | 26 March 2005 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Polity Fragmentation: No | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Constitution | A new constitution was ratified on 23 July 2008, creating a constitutional monarchy | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Executive(s) | King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk; ascended to the throne, 14 December 2006, following the abdication of his father, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk Prime Minister Jigme Thinley, appointed as leader of the majority party in parliament, assumed office 9 April 2008 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Legislature | Bicameral: National Council (25 seats; 20 members elected by each of the 20 electoral districts (dzongkhags) for four-year terms and 5 members nominated by the King; all members are non-partisan; most recent elections, 31 December 2007 and 29 January 2008) National Assembly (47 seats; members elected by direct, popular vote for five-year terms; most recent elections, 24 March 2008) Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party (DPT): 45 People's Democratic Party (PDP): 2 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Judiciary | Supreme Court of Appeal (the King); High Court (appointed by King) <i>Note: The new constitution establishes a Supreme Court, which will serve as the chief court of appeal</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Narrative Description:¹

Executive Recruitment: Ascription (1)

Bhutan is a hereditary monarchy with a nominally elected prime minister. King Jigme Singye Wangchuk ruled this isolated mountain kingdom from 1972 until his son, Crown Prince Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk, ascended to the position on 14 December 2006. While the National Assembly has the theoretical capacity to force the king to resign in favor of his designated successor by a two-thirds vote, given the conservative nature of this body it is unlikely that this power will be used anytime in the near future.

In 1999 the King implemented some significant changes to the political landscape in Bhutan. First, the 1998 royal ordinance decreed that the cabinet be elected by the National Assembly (Tshodgdu) was put into effect. Six cabinet ministers, one of which now serves as the chairman (prime minister) of the cabinet's coordination committee, were elected by the National Assembly from a pool of candidates identified by the king. The position of prime minister is a rotating position among these elected cabinet ministers. The political implications of this administrative change are not yet clear, but at least the basis for a democratic constitutional monarchy may have been put in place. However, while the prime minister is now defined as the head of government, this seems to overstate the significance of his position.

On December 17, 2005, the King announced that he planned to abdicate in favor of his eldest son, Crown Prince Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk by 2008, after a period of progressively increasing responsibilities. The prince spent much of 2005 and 2006 traveling the country to increase support for a new constitution before ascending to the throne in December 2006. Although the King has promised to send a new constitution that would dramatically weaken his executive powers to the people in a referendum, this has not yet occurred. For all practical purposes the king continues to control political life in Bhutan.

Note: Parliamentary elections were held on 31 December 2007 for a 25-member upper chamber (National Council) and on 24 March 2008 for a 47-member lower chamber (National Assembly). National Assembly elections were won by the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (Bhutan Harmony Party, DPT) with 45 seats; the People's Democratic Party won only two seats. King Jigme Khesar Namgyel formally handed administrative power to Prime Minister Jigme Yoser Thinley on 8 May 2008 and a new constitution was promulgated on 2 June 2008.

Executive Constraints: Slight Limitations (2)

Political decision making in Bhutan ultimately resides with the king and his small staff of Buddhist aristocratic advisors. While the National Assembly is traditionally very weak and simply serves to approve legislation initiated by the king, nevertheless, it does hold some important powers. These powers, however, are seldom used. Established in 1953, the National Assembly has 156 members (106 elected). In 1969 the National Assembly was granted the power to remove government ministers (who are appointed by the King). In 1998 the King decreed that the National Assembly, by a two-thirds majority vote, could require the king to abdicate and be replaced by the next in the line of succession. However, given the current membership of this body, the prospects for the National Assembly using this power in the near future are almost non-existent. In practice, the king dominates the political system even though he may not formally veto legislation. While the National Assembly has on occasion rejected the King's recommendations and delayed the implementation of his bills, by and large, the King continues to have enough influence to persuade the National Assembly to approve legislation he considers essential or to withdraw proposals he opposes. The judiciary is not independent of the King.

Despite the overwhelming authority of the King in Bhutanese politics, the reforms enacted by the monarch in 1998 may empower the National Assembly to take a more active role in government in the future. In February 2003 a first draft of a new constitution was presented to the National Assembly for discussion, and was published publicly in March 2005. This document envisages Bhutan evolving into a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy. The focal point of the debate is whether Bhutan should be a multiparty democracy or not. Despite active encouragement by the King to push this reform

¹ The research described in this report was sponsored by the Political Instability Task Force (PITF). The PITF is funded by the Central Intelligence Agency. The views expressed herein are the authors' alone and do not represent the views of the US Government.

effort, may observers of Bhutanese politics argue that these changes will only be cosmetic and that real power and initiative will remain in the hands of the monarch. There were no significant changes in executive constraints in 2006.

Political Participation: Gradual Transition from Uninstitutionalized Competition (5)

Although not illegal, political parties continued to be actively discouraged through 2006. Given the lack of organized political opposition inside Bhutan, this case continues to be defined as “repressed participation” even though elements of “factionalist” and “uninstitutionalized” participation are very pronounced.

Political consciousness has traditionally been very low among the general Bhutanese populace. The ideas of deference and consensus continue to play a larger role in this society than the ideas of efficacy and ideology. However, the role of education, actively promoted by the monarchy since the early 1970s, has begun to slowly transform the political arena in Bhutan. Demands for increased political participation, however, have historically either gone unheeded or have been met with repression. Lacking strong ideological platforms or organizational channels within which to participate, political participation has tended to take on a factional dimension in Bhutan in recent years.

Within Bhutan, the Buddhist majority consists of two core ethnolinguistic groups: the Sharchops of the eastern region of the country and the western-based Ngalongs. Each group follows a distinct branch of Buddhism, with the Sharchops following the Ningmapa sect of Mahayana Buddhism and the Ngalongs adhering to the Drukpa Kagya branch. In an effort to lessen the political inequities between the dominant Ngalongs and the subservient Sharchops, in 1994 the Druk National Congress Party was formed in exile. The remaining third of the population, who reside in the south of the country, are Nepalese descendants who adhere to Hindu religious teachings. Tensions between the socially and politically dominant Tibetan-descended Ngalong ethnic minority and southern Bhutanese majority have remained high since the late 1980s. Discriminatory public policies enacted by the government in the 1990s led to a massive migration of over 100,000 southern Bhutanese to Nepal. The King has actively sought to restrict the migration of the vast majority of these refugees back into the country. Moreover, starting in 1998 the Government initiated a program of resettling northern Buddhists on the land vacated by Hindu refugees now living in seven camps in eastern Nepal. In 1997 the DNC and several Southern Bhutanese-based exile groups formed the United Front for Democracy. Severe human rights abuses have been attributed to the government’s efforts to quell ethnoreligious challenges to Ngalong political primacy. Nepalese groups have derided the monarchy’s movements towards democracy as a ploy to keep international attention away from this crisis. Nevertheless, political parties, long discouraged by the monarchy, were officially approved by the King on 17 March 2007 as a step in preparation for promised future elections.