

Polity IV Country Report 2010: Bhutan

<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Score:</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2009</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2010</td> <td style="width: 15%;">Change</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Polity:</td> <td>3</td> <td>3</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Democ:</td> <td>3</td> <td>3</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Autoc:</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Durable:</td> <td></td> <td>2</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tentative:</td> <td></td> <td>Yes</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Score:	2009	2010	Change	Polity:	3	3	0	Democ:	3	3	0	Autoc:	0	0	0	Durable:		2		Tentative:		Yes		<p style="text-align: center;">Authority Trends, 1946-2010: Bhutan</p>
Score:	2009	2010	Change																						
Polity:	3	3	0																						
Democ:	3	3	0																						
Autoc:	0	0	0																						
Durable:		2																							
Tentative:		Yes																							
SCODE	BHU	CCODE	760	Date of Report	1 June 2011																				
Polity IV Component Variables																									
XRREG	XRCOMP	XROPEN	XCONST	PARREG	PARCOMP																				
3	2	3	4	2	0																				
Date of Most Recent Polity Transition (3 or more point change)																									
End Date			Begin Date																						
7 May 2008			8 May 2008																						
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, <i>dzongkhags</i> , 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: Dual Executive: Ascription and Election (6)

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 were elected by the National Assembly from a pool of candidates selected by the king. The position of prime minister was a rotating position among these elected cabinet ministers. These reforms, while limited in both scope and power, nevertheless, established a the basis for the development of a democratic constitutional monarchy. However, while the prime minister was now defined as the head of government, this seriously overstated the significance of his position.

On December 17, 2005, the King announced that he planned to abdicate the throne 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. Parliamentary elections were held on 31 December 2007 and 24 March 2008. National Assembly elections were won by the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (Bhutan Harmony Party, DPT). 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 and ratified on 23 July 2008. Under the terms of the new constitution, the king must fill the position of prime minister with the head of the majority party in the National Assembly. The rotating nature of the prime minister position was formally abolished.

Executive Constraints: Moderate Limitations (4)

Political decision making in Bhutan ultimately resides with the king and his small staff of Buddhist aristocratic advisors. While the National Assembly has traditionally been very weak and simply served to approve legislation initiated by the king, nevertheless, it did hold some important powers. These powers, however, were seldom used. Established in 1953, the National Assembly originally had 156 members (106 elected). In 1969 the National Assembly was granted the power to remove government ministers (who were 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 conservative membership of this body, it was clear that this power would not be employed any time in the foreseeable future. In practice, the king continued to dominate the political system even though he could 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 continued to have enough influence to persuade the National Assembly to approve legislation he considered essential or to withdraw proposals he opposed. 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 could 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 was whether Bhutan should be a multiparty democracy or not. Despite active encouragement by the King to push this reform effort, many observers of Bhutanese politics argued that the proposed changes would only be cosmetic and that real power and initiative would remain in the hands of the monarch.

The new constitution was finally promulgated in July 2008. The new constitution provided for a bicameral Parliament, with a non-partisan upper house, the 25-member National Council, and a 47-seat lower house, the National Assembly. Both of these assemblies were to serve five-year terms. The king,

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.

moreover, was delegated with the task of appointing five members of the upper house with the remaining 20 seats being elected. The National Assembly, by contrast, was to be entirely elected with the head of the majority party nominated by the king to serve as prime minister. The prime minister's cabinet would be nominated by the king and approved by the National Assembly. The king would remain the head of state and was empowered to appoint members of the Supreme Court, the attorney general, and the heads of national commissions. While the king can return legislation to the government with objections or amendments, once the legislation has been reconsidered and resubmitted by the National Assembly, the king must sign it into law. Given that the political system continues to be dominated by political parties with ties to the royal family, it appears unlikely that the Assembly will resist many of the policies and proposals favored by the King. While the powers of the prime minister are significant under the new constitutional order, nonetheless, the monarch continues to wield substantial formal and informal powers.

Political Participation: Gradual Transition from Uninstitutionalized Competition (5)

Political parties were legalized in Bhutan in June 2007. Despite the establishment of democratic participation in Bhutan in recent years, nonetheless, the party system remains in its infancy as elements of "factionalist" and "uninstitutionalized" participation continue to be 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. While over 80% of the population participated in the 2008 legislative elections, only two parties – both with ties to the royal family – fielded candidates. These parties did not significantly differ from one another in ideology or policy goals. The 2008 National Assembly elections were won by the Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party (DPT) with 45 seats in the Chamber. The People's Democratic Party won only two. The Bhutan People's United Party, which represents the political objectives of the Nepalese ethnic group in the country, were denied registration.

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 historically have reside in the south of the country, are Nepalese descendents 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. In 1988, the Government began stripping thousands of Nepali speakers of their citizenship. The newly formed Bhutanese People's Party responded in 1990 with violent demonstrations, prompting a crackdown on the Nepali population. Over 100,000 Southern Bhutanese fled or were expelled to Nepal in the 1990s. Since this time, 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. Human rights observers have argued that the new constitution does not adequately protect the rights of the Nepali-speakers in Bhutan.