

# **Exploring Bhutan's 'Natural Democracy': In Search of an Alternative View of Democracy**

*Katsu Masaki\**

## **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to make an alternative translation/interpretation of Bhutan's democracy, in place of the mainstream view that the country has recently made a decisive transition toward democracy. It calls our attention to the country's time-honored 'natural democracy,' which rests on monarchical authority and cohesive rural communities. Both of them represent vernacular forms of freedom and equality, contrary to their widely held image as being averse to democracy. This research was made possible by funding from the Japanese Government's Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research.*

## **Introduction**

Bhutan is no exception to the global trend towards democracy. The process of political reforms has been accelerated in recent years, culminating in the promulgation of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan in 2008. Most existing studies consider this as heralding a new era of 'democracy,' given that the Constitution stipulates that the form of government shall be that of 'democratic constitutional monarchy.' Indeed, among the major changes effected is the introduction of the parliamentary system in which the members of the bicameral legislature, consisting of the National Council and the National Assembly, are elected by universal suffrage, and the Cabinet is formed by

---

\* Dr Katsu Masaki is an Associate Professor, Hirao School of Management, Konan University, Japan. Correspondence: k\_masaki425@nifty.com

the ruling party holding the majority of seats in the National Assembly.

Accordingly, the first elections of the National Council and the National Assembly were conducted in 2007 and 2008, while the second elections took place in 2013. The Cabinet was formed in 2008 and 2013 respectively to start a five-year tenure as the popularly elected government. For the first time in the country's history, the government is entrusted to politicians needing to respond to popular pressures owing to the fact that the voters can remove them through the ballot box. The multi-party system has also come into being to prompt politicians to heed electoral demands in order to have any chance of winning office.

Democracy is not entirely new to Bhutan. The country has been treading a steady path to democracy for decades. Bhutan's monarchy was established in 1907, ending incessant feuds over succession and civil wars. The third King, who ascended the throne in 1952, initiated the process of democratization, building on the first and the second Kings' achievements in consolidating the Dynasty's legitimacy and stability. In 1953, the National Assembly was created as a legislative body, with local representatives from all the administrative districts. In 1968, the cabinet system started in order for the King to share his executive powers with the ministers to be appointed by the King.

During the reign of the fourth King, who ruled the country from 1972 to 2006, district- and county-level assemblies were formed in 1981 and 1991 respectively. In 1998, the King relinquished his chair (equivalent to a prime minister) in the cabinet, created the post of the prime minister to be rotated among the cabinet ministers, and entrusted the ministers with full executive roles. 'The next step on the incremental path to full democratization was the

biggest, boldest and the most surprising,<sup>1</sup> namely, a royal decree that was issued in 2001 to enact Bhutan's first constitution, which would further transfer the King's leadership role to the people to usher in a new era of 'democratic constitutional monarchy.'

Bhutan's case is often hailed as the 'middle path to democracy' or the 'gradualist approach to democracy,' in that it does not comply with conventional democratic transition theories, which are based on modern European history. In several areas of Europe, the power of absolute monarchs and the landed aristocracy came to be increasingly challenged by the rising middle class from the seventeenth century onward. This resulted in the emergence of constitutional government, the power of which was to be restricted by constitutional rules defining the relations between rulers and the ruled. It eventually led to the rise of liberal democracy under which politicians acquire the right to rule through competitive elections, and government exercises its power in line with the aspirations of the public.

In Bhutan, unlike in Europe, democratization did not arise out of regime disunity, but was advanced on the initiative of the King. Monarchy has not receded but has taken on renewed importance, as will be delineated below, contrary to the European historical experience, according to which the 'divine right of kings' is a defunct doctrine. The advent of 'democratic constitutional monarchy' has not diminished the role of religion in Bhutan, while in Europe, it was restricted as the authority of the church was called into question.

We thus pay attention to the uniqueness or the 'specialness' of Bhutan, but with reference to European history leading to modern liberal democracy. The country's 'democracy' is discussed because of the move that has

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark Turner, Sonam Chuki, and Jit Tshering, "Democratization by Decree: the Case of Bhutan," *Democratization* 18:1 (2011), pp.184-210: 197.

historically been made towards the establishment of the current constitutional, representative government. Had the present form of government not been adopted, we might not even be deliberating about ‘democracy’ in Bhutan.

Does modern liberal democracy need to remain as our reference point? Is there any other standard by which democracy is discussed and analyzed so that we can free ourselves from the shackles of the orthodox story? If Bhutan’s democracy is to nurture the virtue of ‘government of the people, by the people, and for the people,’ to quote Abraham Lincoln, should we not seek a non-standard notion of democracy that occurs to them more naturally?

With these questions in mind, I hope to explore an alternative manner to inquire into Bhutan’s democracy, instead of drawing on the Eurocentric conception of modern liberal democracy as the foregone frame of reference. For this purpose, first, the paper will examine the pitfalls of equating the country’s democratization with the transition towards modern liberal democracy. Second, it will look into the democratic values embedded in the Bhutanese society, which constitute the country’s ‘home-grown natural democracy.’ Third, ‘natural democracy’ will be further analyzed, in view of its potential to address in an unorthodox manner the aporia of democracy, namely the irreconcilability between individual freedom and universal equality. The paper will conclude by pointing to the need to heed ‘natural democracy,’ to liberate ourselves from the orthodox explanations that center round the country’s adoption of liberal-democratic institutions.

### **Bhutan’s ‘Uniqueness’: With regard to modern liberal democracy**

#### ***Setting the Context: Modern Liberal Democracy***

Liberalism, a political creed committed to individual liberty, was the cornerstone of European history where the

rising middle class demanded that the political and economic privileges monopolized by the few should be revoked, in favor of a more equitable system, in which all are equally accorded the liberty to seek fulfillment. Liberalism thereafter continues to be 'the most powerful force shaping the western political tradition' up to the present.<sup>2</sup> Among a variety of possible forms or models of democracy, liberal democracy presently dominates the academic as well as popular thinking on the subject.

According to the advocates of liberal democracy, its strength is that citizens enjoy freedom and autonomy from the state, thus bringing about the expression of the widest possible range of views and beliefs. Liberal democracy is a system in which free citizens are given rights to grant or withdraw 'consent' to government, mandating it to exercise its power in line with their demands. In recent times, however, the focus of liberal democrats has come to be placed less on 'consent,' than on liberal democracy's capacity to forge 'consensus' or equilibrium in an increasingly complex society where there exists growing competition among rival interests.<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, though democracy can be accounted for, either as institutional arrangements, ideals, or types of behavior toward others,<sup>4</sup> an institutional analysis has in recent times tended to foreclose the other aspects; liberal democracy is generally considered to be attained when the following two conditions are met.<sup>5</sup> First, various systems of checks and balances are instituted to constrain the government, which include a constitution, the separation of powers amongst public institutions, and regular, open

---

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Heywood, *Political Theory: Introduction, Third Edition* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.26.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.42-43.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Crick, *Democracy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002), p.11.

<sup>5</sup> Shin Chiba, *Democracy* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2000), p.26.

elections. In the eyes of liberal democrats, government is a necessary evil in that it needs to exist to enforce law and order, and to safeguard individual liberty. Without devices to fragment governmental power, government is liable to be controlled by a small group that exercises dictatorial power over individual citizens.

Secondly, the state should serve as a neutral arbiter among competing interests in the society, and abstain from exercising social control from above. This is in line with liberalistic commitment to constructing a society where individuals can enjoy liberty in the vibrant sphere of the market, or in a healthy civil society. Because human beings are capable of making rational choices, by taking into account their surroundings, the state should focus on providing enabling conditions for individuals and groups to pursue their own happiness and fulfillment, though some form of social security is needed to protect those who find it difficult to help themselves. The state should refrain from prescribing what values are to be promoted in society.

### ***'Uniqueness' of Bhutan's 'Democracy'***

These two criteria of modern liberal democracy are implied in the above-mentioned assessment of Bhutan's democracy as the 'middle path' or the 'gradualist approach.' The country's case meets the first criterion. The process of separating governmental power culminated in the enactment of the Constitution in 2008, leading to the introduction of the parliamentary system under which free, competitive elections are held for the bicameral legislature. The National Council (NC) is to act as an alert and active house of review, and to question the constitutionality of decisions taken by the National Assembly (NA). The multi-party system<sup>6</sup> is in

---

<sup>6</sup> A multi-party system has not been introduced to the NC or local-level elections, but only to the NA election. This measure is intended to constrain the proliferation of divisive, partisan politics. In a similar vein, a political party is not allowed to be formed along the lines of region, religion, or other

place to compel different groups of politicians to compete with each other to frame politics that best respond to the preferences of the general public.

On the other hand, Bhutan's case can be judged to contravene the second criterion. The Constitution specifies that '[t]he State shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness' (Article 9(2)). At the heart of GNH is the notion of fulfillment as emanating, not only from material prosperity, but also from spiritual and emotional well-being which is closely connected with social harmony and peace. Unrestrained individualism is seen as detrimental to the social fabric, in that it potentially divides people along economic, ethnic, religious, and other lines. With the forward march of modernization, care should be taken to preserve a cohesive society bound by mutual respect and obligation.

While GNH is not specifically referred to elsewhere in the Constitution, there are several clauses that uphold the underlying principles of GNH, which include a provision to promote a 'compassionate society rooted in the Buddhist ethos' (Article 9(20)), as well as provisions to protect the country's spiritual heritage (Article 3) and culture (Article 4). These provisions are to foster spiritual and emotional well-being, an integral element of GNH. Moreover, they are seen as indispensable to protect the independence and sovereignty of the last nation state based on Mahayana Buddhism, a point to be reiterated below. Bhutan is sandwiched between two giant, populous neighbors, China and India, which have merged Tibet and Sikkim into their respective territories.

---

sectional interests. Moreover, in order to deter post-election horse-trading, a two-tier system has been adopted for the NA election; a preliminary round is held to choose two parties that will participate in the final round.

According to Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye, who served as the Chair of the Constitution Drafting Committee,<sup>7</sup> '[t]here is no mention of religion and culture in any constitution of any other country except in the Constitution of Bhutan. Religion and culture play a vital role. Religion provides values and moral fibre whilst culture exhibits a separate identity and unity.'<sup>8</sup> These would conventionally be interpreted as impediments to individual liberty. According to the wisdom of liberal democracy, these types of constitutional clauses risk leaving the definition of a 'good society' in the hands of the few who may articulate particularistic interests.

Why are these 'illiberal' provisions hailed as unique or special in existing studies on Bhutan's democracy? This is because liberal democracy, despite its promise to make possible a high degree of popular responsiveness, tends to cause political power to concentrate in the hands of small groups with money, power and position. This often creates a gulf between government and its subjects. In many of the world's 'advanced' liberal democracies, democracy has become synonymous with authoritarianism or totalitarianism.<sup>9</sup> The ostensible virtue of individual freedom and autonomy is liable to mask the dominance by the privileged few, while the majority of citizens are reduced to passive roles and politics lapse into the concerns of closed elites.

Bhutan's polity is invaluable in today's global society, in that it seeks to promulgate an alternative notion of higher or inner freedom: freedom is considered to be attained when

---

<sup>7</sup> The drafting committee was formed in November 2001 at the authorization of the King. It consisted of thirty-nine representatives from different sections of the society (the central monk body, the twenty districts, the judiciary, and government administration), with Chief Justice, Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye as the chairperson.

<sup>8</sup> Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye, "The Making of the Constitution," *Kuensel* newspaper, November 3, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision, Expanded Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).



people submit themselves to social morals, rather than indulging in egoistic freedom. In this way, unbridled individualism will be deterred, which destabilizes and puts social harmony at risk in other parts of the globe.

**Bhutan's 'home-grown natural democracy': A model of its own**

***Not democratic transition, but translation/interpretation at issue***

At the same time, it is imperative to probe critically into the above assessment, given its inclination to the Eurocentric notion of modern liberal democracy. The 'specialness' or 'uniqueness' of Bhutan's democracy is deliberated because the country has adopted a constitution which has introduced the parliamentary system, to meet the first criterion of liberal democracy. The enactment of the Constitution is regarded as a historical watershed in the cumulative *transition* to (modern liberal) 'democracy,' and is contrasted with the incremental process of democratization in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, touched upon at the beginning of this paper.

In this respect, the above assessment insidiously lapses into historicism, or a mode of thinking assuming any object under investigation as being internally unified and developing over time. A major drawback of historicism is its implicitly stagist view that distinguishes the pre-modern from the modern, or an idea 'first in the West, and then elsewhere' as pointed out by Dipesh Chakrabarty,<sup>10</sup> who in his book *Provincializing Europe*, argues against regarding the 'global' agenda of modernization as taking over West Bengal's 'local' society alien to it. This pitfall manifests itself in

---

<sup>10</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, 2007 Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p.6.

existing studies that dwell on Bhutan's democratic *transition*, as exemplified by the following excerpt.

With the Kingdom of Bhutan becoming a constitutional monarchy and consequently, one of the youngest democracies, the country took another decisive step along a path on which it embarked several years ago. ... For decades, modernization, development and preservation were the main goals of policy decisions rather than actively democratizing the country. But beginning in 1998, Bhutan experienced a rapid, peaceful, guided and unflinching *transition to democracy*.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, this and other similar studies draw on mainstream democratic *transition* theories, delineating political, social and economic factors that normally propel a move towards (modern liberal) democracy. They then conclude that Bhutan's democratization deviates from orthodox explanations, as follows.

It needs to be clearly stated that there was no evident popular demand for such a transformation, and that moreover, very little cultural, social, educational, or political preparation was made for the transformation. Even more to the point, it is difficult, if not impossible, to find evidence that suggests that the transformation of the relationships of the means of production had reached a level where changes in political structures were required.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Marian Gallenkamp, *Democracy in Bhutan: An Analysis of Constitutional Change in a Buddhist Monarchy* (New Delhi: Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, IPCS Research Paper, no.24, 2010), p.2. Emphases added.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Mancall, "Monarchy and Democracy," in *Monarchy and Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Thimphu: Bhutan Center for Media and Democracy, 2010), pp.1-18: 9.

This type of explanation is not irrelevant to Bhutan. On the contrary, it does elucidate the background to the 'incorporation of Bhutan into the ranks of the world's democratic nations,'<sup>13</sup> in terms of the adoption of liberal-democratic institutions. As argued by Chakrabarty, no society is a *tabula rasa*, and '[t]he universal concepts of political modernity encounter pre-existing concepts, categories, institutions and practices through which they get translated and configured differently.'<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, in line with the above-mentioned recent trend to equate democracy with a narrow, institutional notion of politics, it fails to pay due regard to the democratic values that have historically been embedded in Bhutanese society, regardless of liberal-democratic institutional arrangements. This is crucial in that '[g]ood government should be democratic, in both an institutional and a social sense.'<sup>15</sup> Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye correspondingly points out that '[o]urs was not a mandate to change the world but to assimilate [liberal-democratic institutional] change into an existing [social] system.'<sup>16</sup>

The issue at stake, therefore, to paraphrase Chakrabarty,<sup>17</sup> is not so much about the 'uniqueness' or 'specialness' of the country's political *transition*, as about the *translation/interpretation* prevalent in existing studies, seeing Bhutan's social values as supplementary to the prime agenda of promoting liberal democratic institutional reforms. Bhutan used to be 'either romanticized as "Shangri-La," a hidden paradise on earth, or vilified as a tyrannical and medieval kingdom.'<sup>18</sup> Contrary to this orthodox image, a

---

<sup>13</sup> Turner et al., "Democratization by Decree," p.184.

<sup>14</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p.vii.

<sup>15</sup> Crick, *Democracy*, p.92.

<sup>16</sup> Tobgye, "The Making of the Constitution." Parentheses added.

<sup>17</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p.17.

<sup>18</sup> Tashi Wangchhuck, "The Middle Path to Democracy in the Kingdom of Bhutan," *Asian Survey* 44:6 (2004), pp.836-855: 837.

'home-grown natural democracy' has long been thriving in Bhutan,<sup>19</sup> which should be taken into account when studying the country's 'democracy.'

***Bhutan's 'Natural Democracy': (1) Monarchical Democracy***

Underlying the above assessment focusing on the country's democratic *transition* is Aristotle's classical classification that continues to be a mainstream taxonomy of forms of government, namely, rule by a single individual, rule by a small group and rule by the many. According to it, monarchy or rule by a single individual is distinct from democracy or rule by the many. This dichotomy also resonates with European history; it was when the Divine Right of Kings was called into question, that constitutional, representative government came to the fore.

Bhutan's polity, on the other hand, was and is a 'monarchical democracy,'<sup>20</sup> unorthodoxly amalgamating rule by a single individual (monarchy) and rule by the many (democracy). The Constitution not only positions the King as 'the Head of State and the symbol of unity' (Article 2(1)), but also stipulates that the King be 'the upholder of *Chhoe-sid*' (Article 2(2)), namely the religious (*chhoe*) and political (*sid*) values of peace and prosperity. The latter constitutional clause derives from the Buddhist conception of kingship, shared by the people of Bhutan who place their popular will in the King.

In Buddhism, monarchy is regarded as the proper mode of government,<sup>21</sup> under which a good king rests his authority

---

<sup>19</sup> Renata Dessallien, *Democracy, Good Governance and Happiness: Some views from the Kingdom of Bhutan* (Thimphu: Center for Bhutan Studies, CBS Monograph, no.29, 2005), p.71.

<sup>20</sup> Bhabani Sen Gupta, *Bhutan: Towards a Grass-root Participatory Polity* (New Delhi Konark Publishers, 1999), p.52.

<sup>21</sup> Sonam Kinga, *Polity, Kingship and Democracy: A Biography of the Bhutanese State* (Thimphu; Ministry of Education, Royal Government of Bhutan, 2009), pp.17-19.

in his charitable, moral and humble actions. A king is thus expected to promulgate morality in society, as both a secular and a spiritual leader. In return, the people forego their parochial interests to seek the good of a common humanity. Although this notion of kingship is typically equated, from a liberalistic viewpoint, with paternalism preventing people from making moral choices, Buddhism regards it as enhancing the prospects of individuals making moral choices, in that it helps them to transcend the self, or the delusion that human beings are separate and independent agents, and to recognize the oneness of life.

This is how rule by the many (democracy) is to function in Bhutan. The King, as guardian of the nation state, seeks to preserve a cohesive society bound by mutual trust and obligation, and to avert divisive politics that would jeopardize social harmony by positioning himself at the helm of 'three foundations' (*tsawa sum*) comprising the nation, the people and the King. The view of 'three foundations' is in line with the Buddhist notion of the holy trinity (Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Sangha*), and is a vital condition for the nation state to flourish.<sup>22</sup>

In line with this Buddhist notion of kingship, the constitution is widely viewed by the people as 'the gift from the King' who had thoughtfully conceived the need of political reforms to transfer his power to them and their representatives. The King followed the Buddhist notion of 'three foundations,' and ensured public involvement in the preparation of the constitution by getting a copy of the draft constitution distributed to each household. The King then conducted public consultations by visiting all the twenty district capitals to help people grasp the significance of the constitution and to receive comments on the draft constitution. In this way, efforts were made to level off the

---

<sup>22</sup> Karma Ura, *Deities, Archers and Planners: In the Era of Decentralisation* (Thimphu, 2004), p.314.

aspirations of the general public and to attain as wide a consensus as possible concerning the need for liberal-democratic reforms.<sup>23</sup>

This participative nature of the constitution-making built on, and corresponded to traditional practices; the King regularly travels to the countryside to explain the government's ongoing and future plans of action, and solicits the views of his audience on the priorities and needs of their local areas.<sup>24</sup> The King's frequent visits to various parts of the country made the King 'the most informed participant in the National Assembly.'<sup>25</sup> This also set an example which obliged the people's representatives in the National Assembly to endeavor to bring the problems and grievances of the public to the notice of other assembly members, government officials and the King.

In this way, direct interaction between, and among various levels of society was historically a mainstay of Bhutan's polity before the parliamentary system was introduced in 2008, which centers round the representation by professional politicians, most of whom are based in Thimphu. A session of the National Assembly was to be preceded by a series of local-level deliberations (Ura 2004: 133). Upon notification of the tentative date of the National Assembly, local leaders held meetings with the public in their own areas to discuss issues to be raised at the center. This was then followed by district-level meetings in which points to be submitted to the National Assembly were discussed and refined.

---

<sup>23</sup> The first draft was released in March 2005. In addition to the ensuing public consultations in the twenty districts, the draft was posted on a website, so that anyone (even from outside the country) could send comments to the drafting committee. Bhutan Broadcasting Services (the national television and radio stations) also conducted a series of forum discussions on the Constitution to sensitize the general public to the concept and purpose of the Constitution.

<sup>24</sup> Gupta, *Bhutan*, pp.148-149.

<sup>25</sup> Gupta, *Bhutan*, p.149.

This 'monarchical democracy' is also founded on the King's caliber as an agent of modernization, contrary to the mainstream image prevailing elsewhere which sees monarchical institutions as averse to modernity. It was the start of the hereditary monarchy in 1907 that put an end to incessant feuds over succession and the civil wars that had long afflicted the populace. The serf system was abolished, allowing the vast majority of the people to own agricultural land. Tax obligations have substantially been reduced, while alternative sources of revenues have been identified, including tourism and hydropower. A long list can be made of the modernizing reforms made under the monarchy, including the introduction of modern systems of education, health care, transport, and communications.

It is therefore natural that the constitution, intended to bring in modern institutions to the country's polity, has not diminished the role of King, the agent of modernization, even though executive powers have been entrusted to the elected government. On the contrary, the King has assumed greater importance as the 'safety net' against divisive forces that potentially arise with the advent of modern liberal democracy.<sup>26</sup> The King continues to visit the countryside regularly, and maintains his prerogative to issue directives regarding the government's conduct when necessary.<sup>27</sup> As the symbol of unity above and beyond politics, the King will ensure that the needs and wants of disadvantaged groups

---

<sup>26</sup> Kinley Dorji, "Self-censorship: A Means to an End," in *Monarchy and Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Thimphu: Bhutan Center for Media and Democracy, 2010), pp.137-149: 148.

<sup>27</sup> For example, the King issued a directive in June 2012, when the National Assembly was deliberating a bill that would allow the government to retain larger leverage to distribute governmental land for resettlement purposes. Drawing on growing public concern about the prospects that it might accelerate land transfer to individual citizens, the King sent out a message to the effect that governmental land should be preserved in the interest of future generations. This prompted the government to pledge to defer the deliberation of the bill until after the next National Assembly election scheduled for 2013.

are addressed, and that crises are mediated when they arise from pluralistic politics.

In the constitution, accordingly, the term *gyal kham* (which literally means ‘the realm of the King’) is utilized as the equivalent of the nation state. This is to abide by, albeit in an unorthodox manner, a maxim which is widely accepted in political theory, namely that [g]overnment power can only be held in check when the government of the day is prevented from encroaching upon the absolute and unlimited authority of the state.<sup>28</sup> To counter this risk, from the viewpoint of liberal democracy, the state machinery needs to be kept unaligned with any particular leader. In Bhutan, on the other hand, the state is positioned as ‘the realm of the King’ who, as ‘the upholder of *Chhoe-sid*,’ embodies the permanent interests of society, and serves as the symbol of unity above ideological preferences and partisan interests.

Accordingly, an alternative *translation/interpretation* of Bhutan’s democracy can be made, which does not revolve round modern liberal democracy, but draws on ‘monarchical democracy’ as our reference point. The enactment of the Constitution is not necessarily a major watershed in the *transition* to democracy, but can be regarded as a reform that has been infused into the traditional ‘monarchical democracy.’ According to this alternative view, the liberal-democratic changes are supplementary to the existing ‘monarchical democracy,’ not vice versa.

### ***Bhutan’s ‘Natural Democracy’: (2) Grassroots Self-Governance***

As stated above, a cornerstone of Bhutan’s polity has historically been direct interaction between and among different levels of society, with the King at the helm of the nation state. From the modern liberal-democratic viewpoint,

---

<sup>28</sup> Heywood, *Political Theory*, p.78.



the country's 'monarchical democracy' is typically presumed to result in an undemocratic polity whereby the people defer to the directives of higher authorities. On the contrary, the people often negotiated with governmental institutions, and contested official policies when they entailed implications to their livelihoods.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the members representing different districts in the National Assembly often questioned the King's decisions.<sup>30</sup>

This participative nature of Bhutan's polity was founded on the well-honed oratorical skills that the people acquire through popular self-governance.<sup>31</sup> In villages where more than eighty per cent of the population live, decisions affecting local areas are mostly taken in village meetings, attended by at least one representative from every household. While this type of decision-making is seen elsewhere to risk playing into the hands of powerful actors who dominate the proceedings, this is not the case with rural Bhutan. On the contrary, all are given an equal say, debate various opinions, and work out mutual differences to arrive at a conclusion.

This egalitarian nature derives from Buddhist teachings that inculcate the people with an ethos of individual equality and freedom.<sup>32</sup> According to the Dalai Lama,<sup>33</sup> '[t]he Buddhist world view recognizes the fundamental sameness of all

---

<sup>29</sup> For an account of how tax obligations and access to forest resources were continually debated by the people's representatives in the National Assembly, see Adam Pain and Deki Pema, "Continuing Customs of Negotiation and Contestation in Bhutan," *Journal of Bhutan Studies* 2:2 (2000), pp. 219-249. The rural populace also managed to renegotiate their access to forest resources with recourse to a direct appeal to the King.

<sup>30</sup> The National Assembly was a 'fascinating theatre of democracy,' as described in Gupta, *Bhutan*, pp. 103-112. For instance, the members representing different districts questioned the promises given during the King's visit to the countryside, which remained unfulfilled, the King's conciliatory stance towards the insurgency in southern districts (to be taken up later in the paper), or the King's decision to exempt a group of people from (now defunct) corvée obligations.

<sup>31</sup> Wangchuck, *The Middle Path*, pp.841-845.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.841.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

human beings. ... Not only do we desire happiness and seek to avoid suffering, but each of us also has an equal right to pursue these goals. Thus not only are Buddhism and democracy compatible, they are rooted in a common understanding of equality and potential of every individual.' Thriving on this vernacular form of equality and freedom, grassroots self-governance has customarily been in practice in rural Bhutan.

This type of self-governance, however, is typically excluded from the theorizing of modern liberal democracy, in that it is typically labeled 'private,' and thus seen to lie outside the boundaries of politics, narrowly associated with 'public' institutions. For example, the advocates of deliberative democracy, a (de facto) variant of liberal democracy, similarly value open and thorough discussions among those with a disposition to listen to others and treat others with respect. However, in the eyes of Jürgen Habermas, an eminent proponent of the deliberative model, the public-private divide is indispensable as 'the boundary between the demands of truly universal validity and goods which will differ from culture to culture.'<sup>34</sup> A 'public' arena with formal rules defining how equal, impartial interactions are to take place, is considered as vital to ensure that a deliberative process leads to a reasoned outcome. According to this liberal-democratic maxim, informal forms of democracy lack 'truly universal validity,' as does Bhutan's grassroots self-governance.

In tandem with the practice of village meetings is Bhutan's vibrant village-based civil society. In Bhutan, civil society historically takes the form of rural community organizations serving various purposes<sup>35</sup> to promote (a)

---

<sup>34</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p.88.

<sup>35</sup> Bhutan has also seen, in recent years, a mushrooming growth of urban-based civil society organizations (CSOs) which deliver services to disadvantaged segments of the population. To facilitate this, the CSO Act was

cooperation related to farming and harvest practices, (b) solidarity and dependence in times of hardship, (c) spiritual services and related activities, (d) common resource management, (e) hospitality of hosting people engaged in indigenous trade practices, and (f) recreational community activities.<sup>36</sup> In Bhutan, the term 'civil society' usually denotes leverage for maintaining and further developing a cohesive society, or congenial state-society relations. This notion is based on the Buddhist conception of 'three foundations' (*tsawa sum*), referred above in relation to the 'monarchical democracy.'

This is contrary to the notion of modern liberal democracy that postulates a public-private divide, and posits a civil society beyond the reach of government, in which individuals form 'civic' groups in their capacity as 'private' citizens. This mainstream view of civil society thus connotes defense against the state that is postulated as a necessary evil that enforces law and order to protect individual liberty; civil society is presumed to be a sphere for individuals to enjoy autonomy from the state, to pursue the good life as they define it, and to voluntarily engage in advocacy and vigilance against the state. A 'rights-based society' is thus visualized under the liberal-democratic view of civil society. It stands in stark contrast to the 'duty-based society' observed in Bhutan.<sup>37</sup>

This contrast leads us to an alternative *translation* of Bhutan's polity that disposes of the liberalistic public-private distinction, and instead places the private sphere on a par

---

enacted in 2007 and the CSO Authority was established in 2008. In line with the Buddhist notion of 'three foundations,' the CSO Act/Authority does not envisage advocacy types of CSOs.

<sup>36</sup> Tashi Choden, "Civil society in Bhutan: Manifesting the Spirit Within," in *Understanding Civil Society in Bhutan* (The Center for Bhutan Studies: 2005), pp. 19-45.

<sup>37</sup> Lham Dorji, "Understanding the Concept of Civil Society in Bhutan," in *Understanding Civil Society in Bhutan* (The Center for Bhutan Studies: 2005), pp.9-10.

with the public sphere. A typical 'rights-based society' presupposes the existence of a perfect voluntarism in the private domain, which however, serves to mask the inequitable and hierarchical characteristics of civil society.<sup>38</sup> This results in '[t]he general rule of civil society that its stronger members get stronger.'<sup>39</sup> This general rule also spills over into the public domain, causing political power to concentrate in the hands of the stronger members of the society. The liberal-democratic discourse that privileges free, autonomous individuals with recourse to the public-private divide, not only masks the political dominance of small groups, it also marginalizes the caring and nurturing that people engage in within the private arena, as pointed out by the feminists, among others.

In Bhutan, on the other hand, caring and nurturing has been a mainstay of 'natural democracy'; Bhutan's polity is founded on the conception of inner freedom, or the idea that freedom is attained when individuals submit themselves to the morals of mutual trust and obligation. This constitutes the basis of Bhutan's wider practice of grassroots self-governance, which in turn, underlies the participative nature of the country's polity as stated at the beginning of this section. In Bhutan, therefore, the public domain is conditioned by the private domain. The country is a fascinating theatre of the feminists' dictum, 'the personal is political'; it attests to the need for a broader notion of politics as advocated by the feminists, among others.

Accordingly, the promulgation of the constitution is not so much a major leap in the country's *transition* to democracy as it is a move to infuse several liberal-democratic changes into the traditional 'home-grown natural democracy.' 'Natural democracy' had long been thriving in

---

<sup>38</sup> Michael Walzer, *Politics and Passion: Toward a More Egalitarian Liberalism* (2004), pp.66-89.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.78.

rural Bhutan to propagate the democratic ethos of harmony and tolerance, while deterring the unbridled individualism that often puts social stability at risk elsewhere. An alternative *translation/interpretation* of Bhutan's democracy can thus be made, taking into account the country's 'natural democracy' to rectify the current academic and popular thinkings that tend to draw on modern liberal democracies as the main reference point.

***An Alternative Way for Addressing the Governor-Governed Divide***

Underlying the liberal-democratic assertion about the need to separate the public and private realms is a major constitutive dilemma concerning democracy; it is implausible to fully reconcile freedom and equality. Democracy calls for a group of people with a collective identity, which nevertheless cannot be formed without occluding the plurality and difference of its members. Because there exists no natural convergence of interests among them, democracy is bound to entail some form of exclusion from within. Under modern liberal democracy, an irreconcilable difference of viewpoints is to be withdrawn to the private domain, while in the public arena, a middle ground is to be arrived at, through open deliberative interactions and procedures.

This rationalistic view is problematized by the proponents of radical democracy, who point to the arbitrary nature of a 'middle' ground' that tends to mirror the interests dominant in society. They thus propose that the arbitrariness of political decisions be ceaselessly called into question by citizens, especially disadvantaged segments whose voices are liable to be filtered out in official decision-making processes. 'The ideas that power can be dissolved through a rational arrangement, and that legitimacy can be based on pure rationality are an illusion that can endanger

democratic institutions.<sup>40</sup> Radical democracy builds on the Derridean view that it is not feasible to reach a point where ‘government of the people, by the people, and for the people’ is completely achieved. Democracy will always be a promise, or a ‘democracy to come.’<sup>41</sup>

Bhutan’s ‘home-grown natural democracy’ offers an alternative way of addressing this constitutive dilemma of democracy, or of coming closer to the full realization of democracy. To illustrate this point, Miguel Abensour, an eminent proponent of radical democracy, puts forth the notion of ‘insurgent democracy,’<sup>42</sup> and proposes that the masses incessantly engage in direct action to remedy the irresolvable dilemma of democracy. In this way, political grievances can be voiced without being shackled by the formalistic process of government. ‘Insurgent democracy’ does not amount to a political regime, but is protest politics that ‘continues through time, always ready to spring up due to the obstacles encountered.’<sup>43</sup>

Since, in many of so-called ‘advanced’ liberal democracies, democracy has become synonymous with authoritarianism or totalitarianism,<sup>44</sup> it is imperative, as proposed by Abensour, to explore the ‘possibility of annihilating the division between governors and governed.’<sup>45</sup> At the same time, it is another matter whether it is unavoidable to turn to popular political engagement in attenuating the tension between the two. Underlying the notion of radical democracy are simplistic binaries biased toward the Eurocentric view of liberal democracy. First, drawing on the Aristotelian classification, democracy is seen to be distinct from monarchy; in the latter,

---

<sup>40</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 104.

<sup>41</sup> See Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp.43-45.

<sup>42</sup> Miguel Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), p.xxiii.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Wolin, *Politics and Vision*.

<sup>45</sup> Abensour, *Democracy Against the State*, p.96.

'the essence of politics is ... the domination of a single master.'<sup>46</sup> Second, democracy is regarded to spring from 'the emancipation of politics from the hold of religion.'<sup>47</sup> These dichotomies emanate from historical experiences in Europe, according to which constitutional, representative forms of government emerged when sovereign monarchs underpinned by divine authority withered away.

'The division between governors and governed' need not necessarily be tackled through protest politics. Alternatively, the case of Bhutan illustrates how the constitutive dilemma of democracy can be addressed when 'the hold of religion,' and that of 'the single master' bring home to both 'governors and governed' their inherent human nature of being gregarious, and propel them to concern themselves with the good of other beings and with each other. Individuals are thus encouraged to seek to gain inner freedom, to be freed from the internal constraints of egoism and greed. This then causes the democratic ethos of harmony and tolerance to spread to every realm of society. The government is also transformed into an entity subordinated to the society, while the public-private divide fades away. The King, at the helm of the nation state, promulgates the morality of cooperation in the society in accordance with the Buddhist view of kingship or its related notion of 'three foundations' (*tsawa sum*) that comprise the nation, the people and the King.

This is typically interpreted, from the viewpoint of modern liberal democracy, as an impediment to individual freedom, or is seen as running the risk of lapsing into a paternalistic society in which the definition of a 'good society' is left in the hands of elites with particularistic interests. At the same time, if 'the hold of religion' or that of 'the single master' is said to risk resulting in domination by an elite, popular political activism must equally be said to be fraught

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.52.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.17.

with chances of domination by an elite. As stated above, perfect voluntarism is illusory given '[t]he general rule of civil society that its stronger members get stronger.'<sup>48</sup> Radical democracy may add to this inequitable nature of civil society by instigating free individuals to engage in 'free competition,' namely the doctrine that currently breeds the political dominance of small groups in many parts of the globe.

When exploring the 'possibility of annihilating the division between the governors and governed,' therefore, it is imperative not to restrict ourselves to the radical-democratic approach. If individual freedom is to be valued foremost, as asserted by Abensour and other proponents of radical democracy, we must also respect people's freedom to view monarchy and religion as accumulated wisdom tested by time, both of which have served as the basis of Bhutan's 'natural democracy.'

### **Conclusion: In search of an alternative view of democracy**

As mentioned at the outset, this paper is intended to explore an alternative manner to inquire into Bhutan's democracy instead of unwittingly drawing on the Eurocentric notion of modern liberal democracy as the foregone reference point. The analyses made thus far point to the importance of paying heed to 'heterogeneous temporality,'<sup>49</sup> or multiple flows of time surrounding the country's democracy. They include (a) the series of reforms to adopt liberal-democratic institutions, which has increased its pace in the twenty-first century; and (b) the country's 'home-grown natural democracy' that dates back to the start of the monarchical rule, or to even earlier days.

Furthermore, it is also vital to work to rectify such conventional stories which center around (a), and thus focus

---

<sup>48</sup> Walzer, *Politics and Passion*, p.78.

<sup>49</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p.243.



on the democratic *transition* of Bhutan. We should instead problematize this orthodox *translation/interpretation* of Bhutan's democracy, while (b) recedes into the background. Otherwise, we would lapse into historicism, assuming 'first in the West, and then elsewhere.'

This is reminiscent of recent debates regarding culture and development in development studies, which seek to remedy the orthodox notion of culture as something development acts on (either as hindrance or resource in the quest of development). Current wisdom has it that the mainstream notion of development is itself a cultural artifact that places European societies at the pinnacle of progress. Instead of ranking various societies at different stages of development, efforts have recently been made to discern multiple forms of development.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, it is imperative to embrace the idea that the mainstream notion of modern liberal democracy is a cultural artifact. Moreover, as part of our efforts to acknowledge multiple forms of democracy, the intrinsic value of the country's 'natural democracy' is to be taken note of. Contrary to the widely held view of traditional Bhutan as 'Shangri-La' or a 'mythical kingdom,' modern political concepts (such as civil society, equality and freedom) have historically been embedded in the Bhutanese society.

This 'natural democracy' has not only been thriving in Bhutan, but has also been a fertile ground for the participative nature of the country's polity; it nurtures an ethos of harmony and tolerance, and thus helps to foster associative bonds among the people that shape their desires, values and purposes. Such a public culture, assigning individuals a sense of the common good, is indispensable to liberal democracy if it is to function as pointed out by

---

<sup>50</sup> Bhutan's Gross National Happiness is a prominent example of an alternative version of development, questioning the major modernist view as material progress.

Michael Walzer who portrays liberalism as a 'self-subverting doctrine' upholding a society composed of individuals separated from one another, and at the same time, requiring their associative ties.<sup>51</sup> This maxim has been well practiced in Bhutan, where 'natural democracy' provides the basis of liberal-democratic reforms.

To answer the questions raised at the beginning, the Eurocentric notion of modern liberal democracy need not remain our major referent, but the country's 'home-grown natural democracy' can take its place, if we are to liberate ourselves from the shackles of the orthodox story about liberal-democratic *transition*, and also to broaden our thus far narrow views on democracy. In this way, we can put into practice a well-known maxim found in political theory textbooks; 'democracy' is not a single, unambiguous phenomenon, ... (it) inevitably brings forth a variety of models that offer different forms and mechanisms of 'popular rule.'<sup>52</sup>

Liberal democracy not only takes precedence in existing literature on Bhutan's democracy, it also dominates wider academic and popular thinking on democracy, resulting in the general *mistranslation/misinterpretation* relegating democracy to institutional devices aimed at forging a reasonable 'consensus' among free, autonomous individuals. This minimalist conception of politics has caused political power to concentrate in the hands of the few, and to create a gulf between government and the people in many parts of today's globe. Bhutan's case can serve as a source of inspiration for those of us who are exploring ways to overcome the predicament of today's 'democracy.'

---

<sup>51</sup> Walzer, *Politics and Passion*, pp.153-154.

<sup>52</sup> Heywood, *Political Theory*, p.222.