

FOCUS

Bhutan: Welcome Changes in the Political System

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

In order to make greater use of their own resources, the people in the country must be galvanised to achieve this goal. Genuine development inevitably links to popular participation, public accountability and respect for fundamental human rights. It is important to note that in a participatory government, seldom famine or war breaks out.

THE recent constitutional changes initiated by King Wangchuk in Bhutan (Druk Yul ("the land of the Thunder Dragon")) reflect his circumspection and far-sightedness. They are significant and usher in a new era in the political environment of the country. No country can now be free from the impact of rapidly changing world due to globalisation of economy and information technology. Any action or inaction at the global level has a direct or indirect effect on men and women in Bhutan. The fact that many Bhutanese nationals are exposed to the outside world has played a role in developing a participatory government in the country. The wind of change in the political system came to Nepal in 1989 and has now finally come to Bhutan.

its beautiful and pristine natural environment. The car journey from the border town Phuntsholing to Thimpu is unforgettable as it entails climbing from one picturesque mountain range to another experiencing a rare view of flora and fauna. (I had the opportunity to visit Thimpu by car from its border town on an official trip in 1978 and was able to have an audience with the King). Bhutan's state religion is the Drukpa sect of Tantric Buddhism. The religion plays a vital role in everyday life and shaped the history of the nation. Bhutanese are proud of their traditional dress which they invariably wear inside the country. Till early 1970s, Bhutanese society remained largely unchanged in both its make up and outlook. Bhutan as a country was then isolated and the people were scarcely involved or interested in the outside world.

Brief Background
Bhutan is nearly one third of Bangladesh in area with a population of about 160,000 located in the heart of the Himalayas. It is surrounded by India to the south and China to the north. It rises from foothills overlooking the Brahmaputra river to the southern slopes of the Himalayas which rise to over 24,608 ft and make up most of the country. The valleys in the centre of the country are wide and fertile and almost 95% of the work force are farmers. The capital-Thimpu- is located in the valley and a river of the same name passes through the capital. Though the country is tucked away between some of the world's most over crowded and ecologically decimated countries, it has been able to retain

Since 1974, Bhutan has been ruled by the young King whose title "Druk Gyalpo" means precious ruler of the Dragon people. When his father suddenly died, he was recalled from his school in England to accede to the throne at 19 years of age. King Jigme Singye Wangchuk (42) is the fourth in a dynasty that has ruled the country since 1907. Although the King is an absolute ruler he governs the country in a consultative manner. He has been known not to refuse a citizen's request for an audience. He tours the country to keep a pulse of the nation. To him "Gross National Happiness" is his yardstick of success. The question is: why did the

King introduce the constitutional changes of a more participatory government? In my view, there are a number of reasons which may have led to the political reforms in Bhutan.

Possible Reasons for Changes
First, the King has a progressive mind and a liberal attitude. He was quoted by "Tashi Delek", Druk Air's in-flight magazine as saying: "It is the system, not the throne, which is important. A monarchy is not the best form of government because a King is chosen by birth and not by merit. The people of Bhutan must be able to establish a system which works for them." Therefore, it is not unusual indeed to see that the King is attempting to shape the government with more accountability to the people.

Secondly, we face an increasingly borderless world, a world of intense competition and globalisation. Democracy and effective economics go hand in hand. We need a new style of government, one which acts strongly within the realms of the possible, one with a disposition toward letting individuals participate in a debate on the core national issues within a favourable climate of freedom and tolerance.

Thirdly, it is important to note that the number of democ-

racies in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe has increased dramatically within the last 10 years. Bhutan cannot remain insulated from this global trend. In the region itself, since 1989, Bhutan's western neighbour - Nepal - has turned into a constitutional monarchy. The Nepalese King does not rule any more but reigns. Its northern neighbour China is opening up gradually and this has been amply reflected recently in allowing President Clinton to telecast live to the students at Beijing University with a potential audience of millions of people in China.

Fourthly, the material interests of trade and commerce have a way of influencing politics in the country and Bhutan appears to be no exception. Bhutan's interaction with SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Co-operation) has a tangible impact on its political and economic environment. Bhutan's trade is being regulated by the rules of World Trade Organisation and Bhutan has to fall in line with the international rules.

Fifthly, although Bhutan is required to have consultation with India in foreign affairs under the terms of the 1949 Treaty with India (India replaced Britain as a party to the Treaty), Bhutan decided to ex-

pose itself to more of the world - a process that has continued right up to the present. Entry into the UN was a major step in the modernisation process started by the King's father. Bhutan has opened diplomatic Missions in India, Bangladesh and Nepal. They have diplomatic Missions at the UN both in Geneva and New York. Bhutan is a respectable member in the comity of nations. The communication with other nations appears to be an added stimulus to the undertaking of reforms by the King.

Finally, the mind-set of the people of Bhutan is gradually being influenced and transformed by the information technology with the consequence that Bhutan's identity of earlier centuries is breaking down. Centuries old isolation has given way to openness. Many educated Bhutanese nationals have become more politicised and formed opposition groups, though they are now in exile.

Constitutional Reforms
Although the King is young, he is insightful and sagacious. He realises that days of absolute monarchy are being replaced by a system of participatory government with appropriate checks and balances.

Tradition and people: Now the wind of change may blow

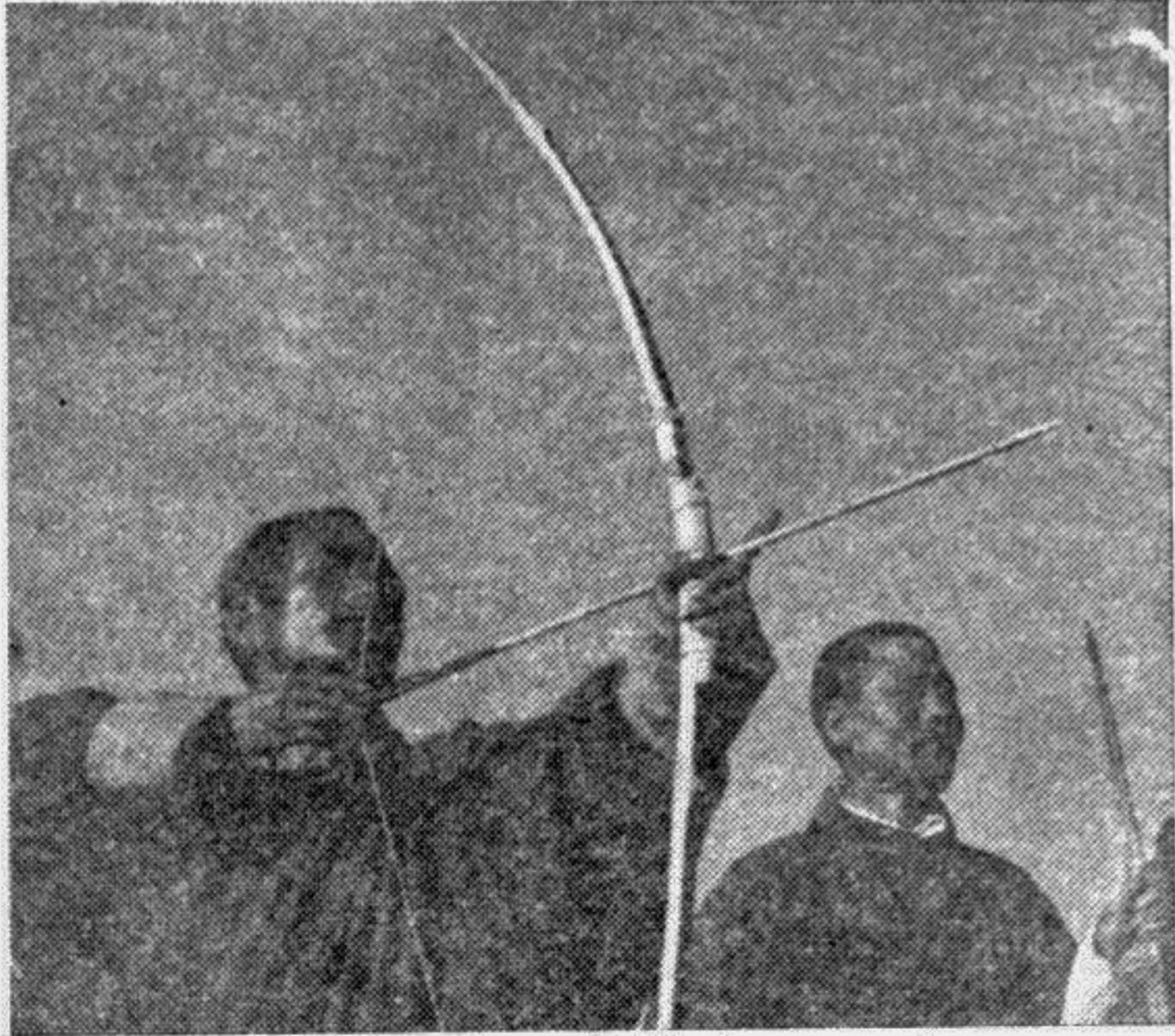
The King dissolved his cabinet recently and has allowed the indirectly-elected National Assembly of 150 members to acquire new powers. The Assembly has been given the right to elect the majority of members in the country's cabinet (recently six Ministers were approved by the Assembly through a secret ballot). Under the new rules, the King will have to abdicate in favour of the crown prince if there is ever a two-thirds majority in the Assembly for him to go.

It may be pointed out that two thirds of the Assembly's 150 members are chosen by district councils, the rest are appointed by the King or the Buddhist clergy. Though the King retains a hold over the National Assembly, he is seen to be making changes to put in place the checks and balances in the political system in the kingdom for more accountability.

and the issue needs to be resolved for the sake of political stability. It may be pointed out that during the last 10 years the minority people of Nepalese origin (about 100,000) had to leave Bhutan as they were not considered as Bhutanese nationals. They took refuge in Nepal and continue to live in camps in Nepal. Bhutan perceives that its security and integrity could be threatened by the presence of these people just as they did in Sikkim not in the distant past! It is the people of Nepalese origin who started the agitation in Sikkim against Chogyal (the ruler) which led, in the end, to the integration of Sikkim with India. However, there is a view that the fear is misplaced in Bhutan. They have lived in Bhutan for generations and they claim they are more Bhutanese than they are Nepalese. They find it hard to believe they could be a security



Southern Bhutanese playing traditional musical instruments.



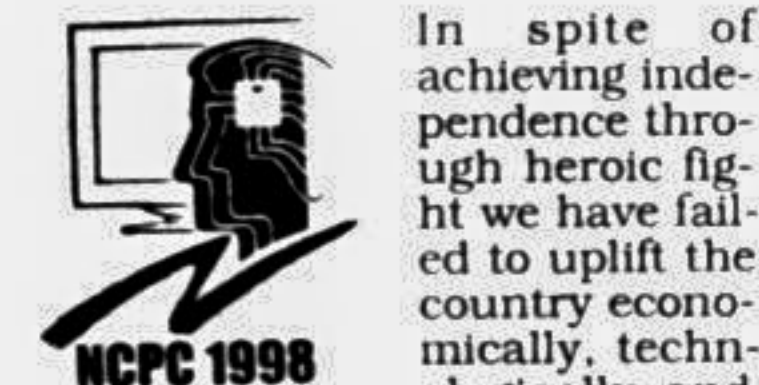
Arching, a favourite Bhutanese sports.

National Computer Programming Contest 1998 organised by Proshika in collaboration with The Daily Star 5th August 1998 Hotel Sheraton Dhaka Bangladesh

Initiative and Right Priority: Prerequisite for a Breakthrough

by Prof. Mohammad Kaykobad

I have already come to learn that computer professional and the Government are coming forward to contribute to the contest. It is really great to think that everything is going that positive. I believe this contest will arouse a lot of interest not only among the participant students but also among computer professionals, vendors and general public to feel and see the performance of our students - possibly the best skill we are bestowed with.



In spite of achieving independence through heroic fight we have failed to uplift the country economically, technologically and in other conceivable sectors. It is needless to say that although we have a lot of potential, our country is still known as a country of natural calamities, political turmoil and famine. This fact is really very heartening to those, who stay abroad and who have earned a lot of reputation through their merit and hard labour. Building of a nation requires a lot of sacrifice initiated by great people, and then followed by other people who get motivated from the examples set by these great souls. We do not seem to have many such examples in front of us, neither do we like to recognise them if they exist. There goes the famous proverb - Example is better than precept. We have not been able to discover examples that can be used for the development of this poor nation. For a nation to prosper this is very important, and this is where great men play their role in developing confidence, in making people feel that they do have the capability. This is by example that you can uplift the confidence of the people and not by precept.

students will find that they were born in the same village, where one of these distinguished countrymen was born, or they studied in the same school, college or university. These facts will go a long way to develop their confidence. They will feel like belonging to a population who are not as ordinary in merit as the success of the country.

How are Bangladeshis doing abroad?
Professor Fazle Hossain of Houston University was adjudged the engineer of the year. Research findings of Dr. Abdul Malik of the University of Waterloo, Canada, were published in the Journal of Analytical Chemistry by the title of his paper, and the cover page designed using his graphs and pictures. Dr. Mustafizur Rahman of the same university and Dr. Awwal of the Wright State University have been adjudged the best teachers. His own doctoral supervisor was astonished to see that Dr. Ziaul Hasan Masum at Bell Lab Holmdel campus is doing so well that within 16 months of his service Dr. Masum was drawing more salary than him in spite of an incomparable difference of duration in service. Professor Karim of the University of Dayton has earned enviable reputation through establishing labs and writing text books on optoelectronics. Not only that he has been heading a department and directing a centre for quite some time. Many of our own graduates have been employed in prestigious organisations like Motorola, IBM, Intel etc., needless to say that by virtue of their own merit. It may be noted here that since we do not have a very praiseworthy heritage in education and research, at least not comparable to that of India, these Bangladeshi nationals had to really work very hard to achieve such recognition and distinction.

What are we planning to do?
A very renowned Bangladeshi uttered that we do not know how to praise, we do not know how to encourage. Can't we be a little bit more generous to appreciate the fame that Bangladeshis are bringing for the nation? This will inspire others to achieve this distinction. These examples gave me such an inspiration that I decided to take initiative for the introduction of this culture if necessary even in a small scale. I am sure that a routine-annual festival for a routine-job performing person like me. As the first step we are now collecting the names of Bangladeshis, particularly in the area of computer science and engineering, who have significantly contributed to the world of science and engineering. Once I can collect their bio-data containing their affiliation at home, and academic institutions attended, as well as abroad, together with their portraits, I plan to hang these on the wall of CSE Department near the lobby where students spend their recess time. I am sure some of these young talented

Programmer skill of the team members and their knowledge of algorithms looked very impressive to me. During their preparation hardly had I spent any time in teaching them algorithms. However, they missed much needed experience of competitive environment. In the Regional Contest held at NSU for the first time no team from abroad participated, and Suman, Shaikat and Shushom were never challenged in the contest. I was unable to arrange such competition as well. Ultimately this lack of experience did not allow them to show their natural performance. After the contest was over they became frustrated at their performance. I thank Professor Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, members of my family and other well-wishers from BUET and other places, who eagerly waited and prayed for a good success from us and remained with the internet throughout the night. We could not perform up to their expectation. But this sincere wish will encourage our future team to perform better.

Our Programming Team for ACM ICPC at Atlanta
The programming team from BUET consisted of Suman Suman (Suman), Shaikat Tarique Mesbaul Islam (Shushom). I was impressed by the dedication and seriousness with which they prepared themselves. They have spent hours solving problem sets of past years even in between the examinations - an even that is conceivable for brilliant students like them when we consider that Suman's work per cent CGPA, and the other two have also excellent CGPA. After the examinations are over they did not take rest, they started marathon practice sessions starting from 8am and closing at 8pm. This was a fantastic feeling also for me. If we had dedication at this level the fame of the country could have been completely changed. They were kept in the back of their mind like them when we are spending resources of this poor country, so it must be well spent. The financial contribution of the university towards our journey was supplemented by Beximco through Mr. Kamal, who was kind enough to respond very positively.

Some encouragement for our students
Encouraging is the fact that Dr. Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir has already given a reception to these boys, and has promised to give computers worth Tk. One lac and laboratory facilities for the department. This has motivated students further to perform better. In the mean time Bangladesh Computer Society is arranging another reception on the 25th of August to these participants, who solved more than one hundred problems. These events have given a tremendous stimulus to all of us who are associated with this. The other day Kazi Faruque Ahmed, Principal of Borhanuddin Postgraduate Degree College requested me to make these brilliant students available for a reception. Such is the interest grown among the people. Let us sponsor this movement to achieve some national goal. Let this interest among us encourage our youngsters to attain excellence in their skill. Let the fact of overcoming the mighty Europe even in number of problems solved reach our students to a new height.

National Computer Programming Contest
The interest in the ensuing National Computer Programming Contest organised by Proshika in collaboration with the Daily Star is gaining mo-

mentum through generous publicity by the later organisations. Any sports event is given wide coverage in our national dailies. Recently we have seen how importance the World Cup gained through the very active role played by our journalists. An event with which we are in no way associated and it is not seen that in foreseeable future we will have any chance of participating there, was given so much coverage that often over 70% of the front page was covered by tidbits of the World Cup as if it were as important in our national life as Bangladeshhuddhu bridge or floods in different districts. I thank the Daily Star for giving such wide coverage. I hope that other interested personalities will also come forward to express their opinion and encourage the students.

Our Students after returning home
Students decided to continue with their training solving problems every night before going to sleep. All on a sudden this internet programming competition came to their knowledge. They found an important place where they can sharpen their skill and measure it with the programmers of the world. Phenomenal performance of all well-wishers from BUET and other places, who eagerly waited and prayed for a good success from us and remained with the internet throughout the night. We could not perform up to their expectation. But this sincere wish will encourage our future team to perform better.

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Zakaria Swapan was planning for a programming contest, even when we were in USA, to encourage these students. And now it is being done in a befitting manner. I thank the Honourable Prime Minister for giving consent to be present in the contest and encourage these brilliant boys. This will possibly be the first event of its kind, where the Head of the Government is participating. Rightly it has been named the National Computer Programming Contest. This will be held at Hotel Sheraton on the 5th of August. Organisers are working day and night to make it a success. In order to encourage participation of students away from the capital, organisers are paying Tk. 3000 to each team consisting of 3 students. Good prize money and prizes will be available for winning teams. Ten teams will be given prizes. I have already come to learn that computer professional and the Government are coming forward to contribute to the contest. It is really great to think that everything is going that positive. I believe this contest will arouse a lot of interest not only among the participant students but also among computer professionals, vendors and general public to feel and see the performance of our students - possibly the best skill we are bestowed with. This will give a preliminary ranking of the computer science education of all Bangladeshi academic institutions. This is the opportunity to measure strengths and weakness of students of different universities.

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Reactions of Opposition Groups

Although the changes reflect the notions of participatory government in the kingdom, one of the exiled opposition groups - the United Front for Democracy - which represents mainly the country's Buddhist community is reported to be unhappy. They maintain that so long the members of the National Assembly are not directly elected, the participation of the people in the government remains unfulfilled. Its spokesman C.B. Dahal is reported to have said: "There is nothing which we believe that is really democratic which is going to come out of this [the changes]." Sarchop (Bhutan's second largest community) leader in exile in India, Ronthong Dorji also expressed his disapproval of the constitutional changes and is unlikely to be satisfied with these "cosmetic" changes.

However, another opposition group - the Bhutanese Appeal Movement Co-ordinating Council - the voice of the country's minority Nepali speaking people - had responded more positively to the changes. The Council's spokesman Ratan Gazmer said: "I think it's a very good gesture on the part of the government to have made these changes." They felt that the changes will provide more accountability of the government to the people and would indirectly help resolve the refugee problem of the Nepal speaking people of the country. The repatriation of refugees has dogged the countries for some years

Conclusion

It is needless to emphasise that development in a country must be people-oriented. It calls for not only participation of people but also for action to spread the benefits of economic growth among the people. In order to make greater use of their own resources, the people in the country must be galvanised to achieve this goal. Genuine development inevitably links to popular participation, public accountability and respect for fundamental human rights. It is important to note that in a participatory government, seldom famine or war breaks out. It is significant to note that under the new rules the abdication of the King can be forced by the National Assembly and this implies that the King is not above the will of the people. In my view, transforming Bhutan within the fold of participatory government while preserving its unique culture and traditions is a daunting task for a King. We should not be under the delusion that democratic institutions can be built in one day in a country where centuries old traditions, customs, cultural history and religious sentiments underpin the monarchical system. One would argue that the changes will invigorate the country as a whole. It is good for the people of Bhutan and also for the people of the region.

The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN in Geneva.

Second Sub-regional Meet is a Non-starter

Deepak Gajurel writes from Kathmandu

THE second meeting of foreign secretaries of the South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ), which was expected to speed up sub-regional cooperation, produced little other than rhetoric. The meeting of the quadrangle, comprising Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal and north-east Indian states, passed without any decisions on sub-regional development initiatives and projects. Critics said the sub-regional bloc had failed to take off because of poor planning and lack of initiative. The foreign secretaries decided that working groups would be constituted to examine and recommend specific projects for sub-regional cooperation. In identifying proposals, the working groups would be guided by the principles of maximum synergy and a building block approach. The meeting, nonetheless, failed even to set the modalities for such working groups. The Kathmandu meet merely made some ceremonial decisions and declared "reaffirmation of the commitment of their governments to pursuing sub-regional economic cooperation for accelerating economic growth, overcoming infrastructural constraints and developing and making optimal use of complementarity." The meeting decided that the growth quadrangle will be pursued within the framework of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) with the objective of complementing and supplementing regional cooperation, the foreign office here stated. The responsibilities of preparing project papers for